

· ASCENT ·

FRANCES RUMSEY

ASCENT

UNIV. OF CALIF. LIBRARY, LOS ANGELES



ASCENT

BY

FRANCES RUMSEY

Author of "Mr. Cushing and Mlle. Du
Chastel" and "Cash"

Boni and Liveright
New York 1922

Copyright, 1922, by
BONI AND LIVERIGHT, INC.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I

2132435

*Non mortuis laudabunt te, Domine, necque omnes
qui descendunt in infernum. . . .*

I

LATE in a summer afternoon, and above all an afternoon when the light is not bright but pale and grey with the first twilight, to turn from the wide highway stretching from Wickford to the south into the still deep side road which leads to the highest of the Wickford hills, is to lose one's self in increasing loneliness in the increasing dusk. The villages scatter into isolated houses, the dusty frame barns grow fewer, and the hum of the perpetually passing motors drops away. After a mile or two the ground begins to rise with the eastern slope of the valley. The stretch of country is so far towards the footlands of the Alleghenies that, as the road lifts, the fields below can be seen narrowing and sharpening into ridges, like the surface of a mounting sea. The waves of grain and the roughened waters of corn flow into longer and sparser lines until they thin into the greyer tint of the stony hillsides. The green amongst the rocks gradually pales and fades; and the byway itself becomes at last a path and finally only a broken track, which rises sharply to ascend the last lift of the hill.

From this summit the earth lies freely open to the sky, with one the reflection of the vast undulations of the other. To the south the signs of habitation remain. The eye can still trace where the streams must begin to widen and grow deep and the long white farmhouses gather into villages, and divine that where the folds

ASCENT

of the hills unclose the last sunshine must still be lighting the gold in the grain. But to the west the slopes swing into deeper shadows and mount more and more largely, with the moving effect, as their surfaces touch the paler sky, of long dark lines traced against the fluidity of light; and at the horizon they merge imperceptibly in the mountains.

Perhaps the fact that this is a last vantage point makes more poignant one's sense of a wider and darker country beyond. The summit itself, with its split rocks and its faint show of a stunted underbrush, is the first to show the complete immunity of a region which is still a wilderness. The last farm runs out into stubble three miles back and the last road ends at its base. The glimpses of habitation, in the country immediately below, are reminders that the progression of the seasons, in the valley which must deepen to green and redden to brown under their touch, leaves the monotony of the upland unbroken. It seems beyond the sequences in the circle of fulfilment; and the picture one most readily forms of it is with the moving drift, across its barren face, of a perpetual snow, falling with the same immensity as the immensity of the skies.

As one's glance lowers from the wider view which, in the thinning light, flows out with all its significances and carries thought beyond the horizon, and drops to the roughened surface of the ground, one sees that at one's feet, and scarring the broken earth with its unmistakable outline, there is a grave. There is no stone, no attempt at an enclosure, and no effort to forestall the ultimate pervasion of nature. The narrow mound is the sole commemoration. Its presence breaks,

ASCENT

with a sudden severance, on the accepted premises which the sight of these large spaces of beauty has inspired and on the classic allusions of death with progression. It does not lift imagination to the freedom and finality of a paradise. It rather draws the fancy back to all that the living being, before evanescence, is compelled to experience; not to a poetised renunciation of life, but to the surrender inexplicably forced upon a sentient creature; and it draws it with the brutal jerk of a chain.

II

OLD Elias Lacy had come to Ware within the memory of only its older inhabitants. He had been young enough, at the time, to make both his situation and his attitude peculiar. To the few people who questioned him he replied briefly that he had lost his money; later he explained, in his odd moments of confidence, that he had lost his ambition. But from the first days of his residence there, his tall figure, in the drowsing village, was instinct with the energy of a tradition. His clothes had a set of worn gallantry, his voice the easy inflexions of dealing in many societies, and his light thin hands the delicacy, in their movements, of a long-trained taste. The time of this was far enough distant to throw some of the suggestions of romance around his position, and Ware had wondered, for the first months, into what category of definition the contradiction of his presence there could fit. But the shrewd country judgments, if they had not penetrated him, had none the less, with the passage of time, placed him, and had understood that there was in his closed personality some disaster of character beyond the disasters of action.

As he grew into age he increased his assertions, with his smile drier from year to year, that he had come to like cheap rents. He remained, he said, with a brevity in his comments which suited the fine egoistic wrinkles around his eyes, because all the more sympathetic places were distasteful to him. They had been

full of reproaches when he was young, and now they were full of reminders. He could stand being reproached by the Ware people, whom he frankly admitted he detested, because they did not comprehend him; but he could not stand the reproaches of more animate beings, who would meet him with his own irrefutability. "I know my cynicism is cheap," he constantly told Mr. Basker, the Episcopal clergyman. "But so am I; it is quite logical. I'm not tragic enough to justify you in praying for me. I'm not Job. I am merely the reaction from Emerson and transcendentalism." His penetration had discovered the fact that what people most resented—and he savoured their resentment—was their incapacity to name and date what was wrong in him. They did not understand wrong, he invariably ended these acidulous conversations. To them wrong was merely the absence of right; his wrong, he thanked heaven, was interesting and constructive. It was committed with entire consciousness, and he knew it was worth while; and as he lifted his whitened head, with a quick action of intolerance, he seemed, even to the narrow range of such opinion, to be brushed by poetry and by a sense of some larger fate that it understood.

His wife had in the earliest years dropped with imperceptible ease into lethargy. It was not that she became part of the little world of the women around her; between them and her there were evident separations of capacity; but she did not trouble to keep alive her differences with it, and in time they ceased to be potential. Her husband plainly expected her not to show dissatisfaction with restrictions against which he so constantly chafed. Their relation was

explained by the fact of her flawless beauty, and his eyes never lit on her without a tolerant amusement at what he evidently regarded as the immorality of his admiration for her. Her early death had scarcely touched the current of his habits. He continued to sun himself in the patch of garden behind his little frame house, with his future bound, as he said, by the nervous irregularities of its architecture.

It was absurd, as he was the first to acknowledge, to be so clear in one's vision, and yet so annoyed; but what else could one expect in the face of the inconsistency of Ware? Its refusal to limit its interest to what suited the class of its intelligence made it as spurious, in his eyes, as the pseudo-colonial portico of the Court House and the imitation stone which ornamented so many of the house fronts. How could one ask him to deal dispassionately with people who thought that taste could be acquired and never applied, who admired the stained glass in the Methodist church, and, for all their study of the Art of the East, thrust the most extravagantly bad Japanese fans between the slats of the shutters, on the porches where they perpetually rocked? He could not tolerate their limitations for the sake of their types; yet, as he never failed to finish his raillery, was he himself any better? He read his Wordsworth, and raised his glance to the raw wild beauty of the northern valley without seeing it. Even the landscape lost its loveliness under the wreckage of his dissection. All he could consistently consider was his irritation. His own inadequacies were far more garish, he insisted, than Ware's. It produced inanimate contradictions, like bad architecture and dead minds; and he had produced a constant and

conscious contradiction—and his look, as he considered it, always sharpened to its most incisive irony—in that his taste was forever being proved ineffectual and ridiculous in his son.

His failure here was what old Lacy named his single complete distinction. When Philip Lacy had passed from a pale angular little boy into a young man equally pale, with no charm in his attenuation and no intelligence in the querulousness of his eyes, the father's look had changed with his son's. From the time of the definite establishment of his disappointment, his sharpness had had a new edge. Philip was difficult to blame; his father not only acknowledged it but declared it. He had worked well in high school, and had for years been paid a small salary at the only lawyer's office in the village. What old Lacy found most intolerable in him was his complete lack of mistakes. He was all wrong, he would insist, and never wrong in traceable details. There was never an occasion when one couldn't irrefutably prove that he was right. "You don't need sin, my dear fellow," he had never tired of saying; "but you need to have been a sinner. Be a reformed one—I see one couldn't get your imagination past that. But you need the experience of abnegation. It enriches life; it creates taste. I should think heaven would revolt at your correctness. It's the first use I've ever discovered for myself. My character was evidently so composed that I should give you the distinction of a martyrdom. Come! Don't stand there staring! Go to your room and pray for me." . . .

If Philip had not enough energy of nature for the solace of a definite egoism, he gradually developed, in this constant opposition, the tenacious obstinacy

which was his only form of strength. His father did not see the processes of this growth, since he roused himself from his Boccaccio or his Alfieri too seldom to note any of his son's qualities; but on the evening when Philip paused, on his way to bed, and with his hand on the refuge of the sitting room door announced that he had decided to marry Rebecca Trail, who lived next door, Mr. Lacy's silent stare of response took in the finality of the determination. He had never hesitated, as he said to himself, to recognise the final. In his pause he was evidently passing, in retrospect, over the causes which had made the inevitability of this result, back to his wife and to farther things beyond Philip's memory. When he spoke it was oddly without the recrimination for which his son had braced himself. He briefly said that the two could live with him while he endured and have his bit of money when he died; he had no doubt they would be very happy. He had no comment to offer concerning Rebecca except that, across the narrow strip of lawn, he had long observed her daily habits as indicative of her mind, and the specious tidiness at the front of her house and the familiarity of confusion at the back; and that since Philip wished to marry a housekeeper, it might have been well to choose one with aspirations. But Philip must not make the mistake of supposing he would be intolerant; his intolerance would always be reserved for himself.

Old Lacy was not entirely without opportunities of reaction. He had been attracted one day, in the Wickford museum, by the face of a stooping, fragilely built man, of young middle age, who was bending in an absorbed pleasure over the few Chinese bronzes.

In the deserted rooms they had fallen easily into talk, and later into a bond of friendship. Wickford was a centre, with the sophisticated political movements and the growing museum of the smaller of the large American cities. It was because of the museum that, a year or so before their meeting, John Devon had established himself there. Lacy learned, in their subsequent talks, that he was a scientist of repute, whose works on minerals were recognised and quoted. He had spent half a large fortune in acquiring one of the famous collections of jades, and had travelled to all the odd corners of the world to complete it. His taste for rarities, he told old Lacy, had driven him from the larger museums, and he had determined, by the advice of a curator there, to fix the distinction of the Wickford foundation by endowing a wing to receive his collection.

It was one of the forces which constituted the attraction the two had for each other that Devon was feeling his way, at his age, to the impermeable attitude which Lacy had long since achieved. He was essentially a person of attitudes, the old man had at once divined, since his own interest was always roused by any form of an attempted composition of character. By the light of his own logic he had seen the entirety of Devon—his taciturnity and his sudden loquaciousness, his dry negations and his inexplicable appeal for sympathy; that there was sentimentality in his harshness and superstition in his scepticism. The younger man seldom marked and dated the causes which had created his posture. Where he gave himself away, as old Lacy thought, behind the protection of his smile, was in his dependence on it as a defence.

ASCENT

"By the way," Devon had said to him, on the occasion of one of their only personal exchanges, as his friend was about to set out for an evening train, after a long day spent in examining the flaws in a rose-coloured crystal, "someone said your son was married."

Old Lacy paused at the foot of the steps and looked back to the open doorway. The compact little brick house, in the long row of the silent street, always impressed him by its unavowed reticences, and he thought, as he turned, how little he knew of it, except the light oak table in the library and the lunch which was always brought in on a battered tray by a hurried and talkative servant. He had frequently reflected on Devon's obvious neglect of human relations when he saw the arrival of the tray; once it had led him to ask where Mrs. Devon kept herself, and Devon had replied, as cursorily as the old man himself, that he thanked heaven she detested all that he valued and that she was to educate their son in New York. They had been so enchained, in the hot spring hours, with the blinds lowered and their eyes running from a reference book to the gleam of crystallised sunlight on the table between them, that the roll of sleepy traffic in the sleeping street had never sounded for Mr. Lacy and the arrival of the slip-shod girl with her burden had had no significance for the amused curiosity of his eyes. But now, with Devon's question, he was struck more than ever by the inexplicable appeal in the lack of consistency they betrayed. It occurred to him that Devon's philosophy was created by his case and not by a knowledge of general experience, and the discovery seemed to link the younger man's evident

private uncertainties, his loneliness with his solitude and his interest with his indifference.

"Yes, Philip's married. Her name is Rebecca, Rebecca Trail. She's the aristocracy of Ware—not near enough to the soil to have its flavour. The perfection of her pretentiousness reminds me of the perfection of your vase there; I suppose all perfection's alike! I don't specially mind;" he took off his hat and ran his hand through his close white hair, with his critical glance on the meagre hyacinths set in the border below the tortuous porch railing; "no, I really don't. Philip was bound to do it, or of course he never would have done it; and what a shock I should have had if he had upset my theories of him! All I object to is the usual attitude about such things; the supposition that, if they've no money, at least they are in love, don't you know? Love can be quite as ugly as it can be wicked. Taste, my dear fellow,—it's the possession of taste that damns us; not because it judges crystals, but because it judges ugliness. It never lets one suffer in peace. Ye gods, but this house of yours is as ugly in its way as this marriage; who could have thought, do you suppose, of anything so constructively hideous? From whom do you rent it? And your boy—what's he doing?"

Devon's thin face was lowered and his foot, as he leaned against the door post, pushed to and fro the edge of the frayed mat. "According to your principle, it doesn't much matter what he does. His condemnation, like your son's, will take care of itself. At present,"—he smiled—"it assumes, I must admit, impeccable forms. His mother's using the most approved methods to accomplish it."

ASCENT

"Well, you know,"—old Lacy bent his stiff back and sniffed delicately the scent of the hyacinths,—“one has always the choice—to be lost or saved. Even Philip had that. Little John’s really little, isn’t he? Ten, twelve—what is it? Oh, I suppose you’ll do as badly as I did; you can’t do worse; only don’t forget that it isn’t to a hell you’ll send him by your reasonableness, but to a Rebecca.”

The dry charm of Devon’s smile shone. “It’s rather a job, isn’t it,—to be sensitive in only the right places?”

Mr. Lacy met his eyes. “A fearful job. And my way, you know, isn’t much fun—this looking at illusion through the eyes of disillusion. It’s a formula—that’s the best one can say for it; and sometimes when one’s not got a ritual, a formula helps us to be what we pretend we are. Well, and the boy?”

“He’s a nice little chap—one of the steady sort. As long as I keep my back turned, he may grow into something. It makes his mother less absurd when she’s rid of me. All she wants is enough money and a grievance. Oh, she’ll do well enough for him.”

“I’ve no patience with this modern way of hating.” Lacy glanced at his watch. “I’m the one who has mastered hate—who discovered it was a fine art. Yet when I thought I could impart it to some one, all I’ve succeeded in doing was to teach Philip to be cross! I’ve no mercy for myself, you see; he’s not naturally cross—I taught him to be! Oh, my dear Devon, don’t subliminate me as a stoic or a dreamer. I’m an irritable old man, whose restlessness has no motion and whose resignation has no peace; and good heavens, my train—!” . . .

It was in the spring of the following year that Mr. Lacy stood in the bow window of his little dining room and looked out at the desiccated lilac bush which, even in its age and after continuous neglect, lifted a single spiral of pale mauve against the pane. The window was open and the scent of upturned earth and the perfume of the flower drifted in to meet the perfume of the pine wood in the grate. He appeared to compare them critically, with his habitual air of absent appraisal more attenuated than usual and the peculiar directness of his blue eyes less incisive, as if he were repassing in his thoughts the long line of springs behind him, whose loveliness had always discovered him in rooms with light oak woodwork, with bad carpets, with a clatter of plates from the kitchen continually in his ears and the prospect out of the windows bound by a neighbourhood whose idea of beauty was prettiness and whose curiosity was inquisitiveness. Then he turned to take up the single bottle of port on the table beside him, with his thin veined hand quick and sure in all its movements. The door had opened and closed in the last moments; and the tall young doctor who leaned against it, declined, with a dry nod which betrayed his opinion of Mr. Lacy, his host's motion to a chair.

"She'll live, then?" Mr. Lacy put his question briefly.

"Yes, Mr. Lacy; I take it that she'll live."

Mr. Lacy's hand motioned to the glasses on the table. "You won't, my dear doctor? But the last of my best port—you will, eh? I got it from my grandfather who saw the casks unloaded at Salem. All these years I've regarded it as an image of morality;

ASCENT

not because I specially like port—as a matter of fact I abhor it—but because the opposition between such wine and my poverty was such a good discipline for me. Absurd, isn't it, this thing we loosely call life? And here we've brought another creature into it! You say she'll undoubtedly pull through?"

"Oh, she'll pull through. A child with vitality like that is bound to react. I've thought so all along, and to-day I'm sure of it." The doctor's glance—he was a distant relative of Philip's wife—was again defensive. "From her poor mother she's evidently inherited a constitution."

Mr. Lacy smiled at the brown lights in his glass. "Are you trying to tell me my son's got no chest and no marrow? Because you don't know nearly as much about it as I do. No, no, I owe Rebecca a debt. I can't say her death has cost me much. If you'll allow me to put it so, I don't believe it cost her much either. Probably, on the whole, to die was easier for her than to live. The emotion of which she always seemed to me most supremely incapable was enthusiasm. I've often wondered, in the last days, while I've watched Philip try to feel more grief than he's constitutionally fitted to feel, why sorrow is the sole emotion which it's not considered indelicate to indulge to excess. But there it is; Rebecca, the astounding creature, surprised me; and of course I like to pretend to myself that the one thing I haven't been for a long time," his smile deepened, "is surprised."

"Mrs. Lacy went through a great deal;" the doctor's observation had its inevitable sententiousness.

"Bless you, of course she did! It's not so easy, it

appears, to bring a child into the world. But that she succeeded, and that then she died . . . no, no, that's not what has surprised me. Dear me, no! It's that the baby, her daughter and Philip's, has evidently the taste of life. I'm scarcely a romanticist. But I admit it's stirred my imagination—to see, for the last fortnight, that tiny being cling with every inch of her incredibly small body to all that I'm so long sick of. By Jove, Rebecca's child's got a will!"

"Well, I don't know that we take much to that kind of idea here in these parts. I should say," the doctor had his caution, "that she had plain vitality."

"Vitality—and what makes vitality? Mere blood? This absurd school that thinks will is the result of things and not the cause of them! No, no, I tell you she's made herself live."

The port had warmed the doctor's manner a little. "Of course we had everything against us. I admit that a few days ago I wasn't sure, one way or the other. When you can't get an infant nourished . . ."

Mr. Lacy's glance had passed to the window again and to the house next door, discernible through a hedge of still bare trees and with its decorous prosperity dozing in the sunshine.

"By all the laws of continuity she should have died; it's sentimentally fitting that the child of two such people should leave this world with her mother. All their bad romances say so. Well, what saved her, I ask you? Something no Trail ever had, and no Lacy either—will! Oh, we've been worse than the Trails in our way; I don't deny it. It's worse to fail in your intelligence than to succeed in your stupidity. Good heaven, no one could be enough of a fool to think I

had a will. I've obstinacy, but I've no will. No, it's too much for me. If you could show me the perfection of mediocrity better than it was exemplified in her mother . . ." He paused and his smile again set on his port. "Though there's one thing! In the even sea of your cousin's dreariness, did you ever notice that she had a single beauty—her ears? Yes, it's true! She had delightful little ears; set close and high—don't you know? Really charming!"

The doctor fell into one of the silences which Mr. Lacy frequently inspired. He looked with his masked reticence at his host, and finally, as the more explicable of the two, back to his wine. "He seemed to think," the old gentleman said to his son that evening, "that I ought to realise that everyone else has ears. He's an odd young man—he tends to the safety of the generic. He regards the special as a little indecent. Ah! That's the word! Rebecca's ears were actually a little indecent. Weren't they, eh? No—of course you never noticed them!"

They had gone by mutual consent to the narrow porch, when they rose from the supper table, and drawn two rocking chairs away from the infiltration of light through the closed blinds of the sitting room. The arc lamp at the crossing a few yards away hissed and flickered in the stillness, and every now and then the noises of the kitchen came from the house next door. Rebecca was in this spot still peculiarly present. The high fumed oak stand on which stood a worn Boston fern, in its brown glazed pot, and the hard bright pink cushions on the chairs, had resumed her single effort at the creation of a home. The publicity of the porch had perhaps seemed to her a pro-

tection. Mr. Lacy had a penetrative effect. He filled the little rooms with the discomfort of uncertainty, with his unexpected violences, his unexpected laugh, and his capitulations which were always more disturbing than his resistances; and in this comparatively peopled surrounding, she had evidently felt herself secure from his bewildering contact.

Philip had drawn his chair, with unvarying habit, so that he could discern anyone who passed up or down the street. An instinctive preoccupation with other people's errands was his only form of social feeling, and as his father frequently told him he was happy only in a promiscuity which had none of the interest of human intercourse. He sat with his knees pressed together, his finger tips against each other, and his feet rising from heel to toe with the motion of his chair. Old Lacy noted these details, with a set determination to omit none of the annoyance they caused him, before he continued.

"I went up for a moment after supper; that trained nurse is such a fool. She'd put a hot water bottle at the foot of the crib, and had wrapped it only in a worn-out towel; idiot! I told your mother, years ago, that we couldn't afford cheap linen. Doesn't the woman know flannel when she sees it?"

Philip sighed. "It's very hard—all this responsibility of a young baby that's come upon me. And the nurse says she'll have to leave at the end of the month. Her brother's to be married—to a girl who lives down at Cold Springs. He does very well—he works in a shoe factory—and they've saved quite a bit. That's one thing I'm thankful for; poor Rebecca can't see all that's hard for me."

"My dear Philip, have you ever stopped to think that the only feeling Rebecca created in you was an added obstinacy? No? Well, I have."

Philip rocked for a moment in silence. He had acquired the habit, in self-defence, of falling back on this safe sense of obscurity in regard to what his father said and of an even pursuit of his own thoughts. "Well, it's a terrible thing to be left as I am; I never expected it—no, never. Why, only the week before the baby came I said to Joseph Trail—I met him just at the corner, by the church—that Rebecca had never looked better. I really did. He remembers it, because the day of the funeral he told Carrie Salter so. Of course I didn't hear him, but Carrie said so to Norah, that night, when Norah went over to the Salters to borrow some olive oil." He glanced, with habitual unease, at his father's erect form. "Sometimes it seems to me just too much; that I, of all people, should have had it happen to me!"

Mr. Lacy swerved suddenly. His long habit of intensiveness had given him the power of breaking his rigid silences with all his force of attack. He brought his closed fist down on the arm of his chair and his voice, which had in it a sound strange to Philip, who was so accustomed to his censure, shook.

"By heaven, you don't know even the little when you see it; you actually don't! Can't you understand that it's not Rebecca who's important, or you or me? If Rebecca has any consciousness, I'll tell you what she is—she's glad. She knows now—if she knows anything—that she ought to be dead. Every woman who's produced a child is forced to admit, consciously or subconsciously, certain truths. They're

large truths, they're vital truths. Rebecca—oh, let us finish with Rebecca! She'd be the first to tell you now that she doesn't matter. What matters solely is that little creature upstairs—that creature to whom, if I swing for it, I am going to give a chance!"

Philip's rocking had ceased; he fingered his watch chain helplessly, with the single fear, in the confusion of his mind, that the Trails might be on their porch within earshot.

"She has clung to life!" Mr. Lacy's voice lifted with menace. "She's beat back annihilation. She's an ugly, strong little thing—all resistance and all attack. Oh, I don't fool myself about her. Probably she'll turn out as educated and as unintelligent as all American women. I'll dish her, if she doesn't dish herself, I take it. But she's got her force of personality. That's what's between her and me. She understands it—I know it! She understands that you're an accident and that her mother, poor soul, was one of those accidents that happen to all people who are accidents. She knows that I'm the one to give her a hand up; well, she'll have it! I tell you, I respect that child!"

Philip cleared his voice, with the vague sense that this was more violent than his father's usual outbursts and must be arrested; he finally brought out, with an instinctive attempt at the safety of a diversion: "Since she's so much better, I suppose we might venture to think of a christening."

Mr. Lacy's hand again fell on his chair. "Exactly, a christening! You're perfection itself; and call her Rebecca Trail Lacy, after her mother—ah, I'm wrong, her poor dear mother. But I can tell you one thing;" he turned on Philip, through the obscurity; "she's to

ASCENT

be disposed of by me. She's not to be bothered by stupidities, she's not to be christened. I'll have none of that nonsense. Her name—do you hear me?—her name's Olive."

Philip had never more desired the power of insistence. He had an outraged conviction of the comments of the neighbourhood, and he whipped up his resistance. "But why Olive?"

"Never mind why. I knew a woman once—Olive was her name—do you see? Oh, centuries and centuries ago . . . a strange creature. And all across the centuries she's been with me. . . . That's something wiser people than you can't understand,—the way the furtive passing physical contacts perpetuate themselves in one's spirit. For me this child named herself Olive when she refused to die; and who are you and I," Mr. Lacy's malice gleamed like a light in the stillness, "to interfere with her decisions for herself?"

Philip made some murmur of reply; it struck him as the most incongruous baptismal ceremony he had ever imagined, with his thoughts still circling about a lace dress for the baby and a profusion of white flowers, and himself in the double emotionality of his fatherhood and his grief.

Mr. Lacy rose, jerked his chair from his path, and turned towards the door. "So that's settled. And you'll never, resign yourself to it, see anything of yourself or her mother, or of accidents and failures in her. She won't need a saving grace; I know. . . ." His look shone again. "I've examined her ears, and thank God they're rather ugly!"

III

MR. LACY never entered the child's room without an accentuated sense of the return in her unintelligent glance. It had frequently struck him in his experience that the ways in which personality is made are traceable by the finer perception; and though he could have smiled at the extravagance of the thought, he felt, each time he looked at the little Olive, that her character was composing itself under his eyes. She seemed not only to extend, as she grew, the range of sharp and inquisitive senses, but to feel about—sometimes it seemed to him positively that—for the ways she could impress and impose herself. She was always and increasingly possessed of a determination so definite that it carried a suggestion of a strength far beyond her capacity. Her actions were acute with her vitality; and from the hours when he sat beside her bed, and later beside her little carriage, drawn out of the sun on Rebecca's porch, and watched the growing motions of her legs and arms and the reflective power creep into her eyes, he had more and more a sense of the confirmation of his fantastic idea.

As the months passed and lengthened, it strengthened with her strength. Throughout her childish relation with him, with her old nurse and with her father, he fancied that he could trace in her this odd effect of a calculation. He never lost sight of the pressure of her tenacity or the pulse of her will. She had become

active and long, with fine bones and little of the usual baby plumpness; and every day Mr. Lacy felt in her a new restlessness. She learned to walk and to talk with the same definiteness, and always, as he guessed, with her quick eyes watching and searching for the new ways of management and manipulation which were becoming apparent to her. He divined already the rapidity and dominance of her quality of response. If he brought her a toy, when she was three or four, Mr. Lacy could have sworn that if he himself showed no admiration for her interest in it, that interest ceased. She was fonder of her tyranny of old Norah, as it seemed to him, than of all Norah's heavily kind care; and she was undoubtedly more diverted in watching the contraction of her father's pale eyebrows and of his pained protests that really she was a strange child to be Rebecca's daughter, than of sitting on his lap and playing with his watch chain.

It was her treatment of Philip, indeed, which first convinced her grandfather of the beginnings of her selective sense. The year that she was six he could measure the difference with which her eyes passed from him to Philip and from Philip back to him; and finally he was sure that they rested on him—whenever he was at his usual task of condemning his son's inefficiencies—with understanding. She one day even told him that her father and Norah were stupid, scarcely with rancour but with the air of having reached a conclusion which corresponded with his own. It was evident to him that she had begun to listen. She had heard him say so often that his son was illogical and Norah slow that her first observations took the tincture of his. Mr. Lacy grew to have a delightful sense of

her pleasure in his company—not based on a facile sentimentality, as he told himself, but because of the added interest it gave the flavour of his own penetrative adjectives, when he heard them in her mouth.

Yet if she began to want reasons and facts, they always, as he traced it, came back to herself. When the Salter house, further along the street, burned to the ground, Philip was disturbed by Olive's instant assumption that the catastrophe was after all unimportant since it could make no conceivable difference to the Lacys' comfort; or that when a little boy, who lived opposite, died in the worst suffering of diphtheria, her only interest should be her personal avoidance of contagion. "She actually said," he told his father, "what do I care as long as it's not me?"

Mr. Lacy's laugh broke out. "You always welcome everything with a preconceived sentiment, don't you? It's astonishing—to be so pat as you are, and to have no sense of fitness. Well, and do you think—may one ask?—that you're going to bring Olive up by the Ten Commandments?"

"I'm sure I don't know why not." Philip had been exasperated as far as his obstinacy. "After all, I happen to believe in them, if you don't."

"Good heavens, my dear fellow, I shan't stop you! It's not nearly as simple as that. It's Olive herself who will stop you."

"You mean, I suppose, that you'll encourage her not to obey them;" Philip had never had more clearly his latent sense that he was right, crippled by his personal inhibitions. "No, it's shocking, father, that she should go on like this—aping in you what she can't understand."

ASCENT

Mr. Lacy's face grew graver. "I mean that she hasn't the capacity to obey them. Oh, don't worry; she'll never flatten into sin any more than she'll flatten into virtue! She's got judgment and she's got sense. It's her own judgment and her own sense, I admit; but I doubt if you ever impose on her yours." His look wavered on the edge of a smile. "The child's got a touch of the fateful—don't you see? She's all eagerness, and yet she can't absorb."

He had begun, in the same summer, to plan Olive's lessons; and it was not only the interest and contagion of her awkward curiosity which added to his view of her. If her look, as it continually turned to him, expanded and enriched his world, it also had the power to contract it to the warmth of the personal. It pleased him as no spontaneous action could have pleased him that the more he told her and the wider doors he opened for her, the more readily and warmly her hand slipped into his. In his extravagance of view, she seemed already to prove his theory about her. She felt her way into his personality, he could have said, and found how much she loved him as her intelligence grew. But if her affection could withstand the hard rulings of his mind, he had to admit, with his wry look, that it was through her own mind that he reached her affection.

"Do you like to be with me?" he abruptly asked her, one morning when she came, fresh and hot from an hour amongst the flower beds, to the sitting room with her reader.

"Of course, grandfather, I love to dig; but if I have to come in from the garden" . . . she slipped down on his knees and traced with her thin brown finger the thin blue veins on his hand.

"I'll do, eh?"

"I've not much choice, have I? Just father and Norah! But I think you're dreadfully interesting. I like you for being so disagreeable. Of course father thinks it wrong to be disagreeable. But I'm sure you have a much better time than he does. Everyone's afraid of you; and that's what's fun, isn't it? That's what I want—to have everyone afraid of me."

Mr. Lacy hesitated before he spoke again; his mind had so leapt ahead of her childhood that he found himself using, in dealing with her, his own thoughts if not his own terms. He lifted her long brown braid of hair and drew it through his fingers, with one of his sudden changes of tone. "After all, my dear, I'm much more dreadful to my useless self than to anyone else!"

Olive threw up her head, with a motion familiar to her. "Well, I shall be," she spoke clearly, "just as dreadful as I can."

"It's very lonely, to be dreadful," said Mr. Lacy briefly; he did not know whether his tone quite concealed his sense of the odd earnestness which underlay all their conversations.

"You seem to like being lonely; perhaps I shall." She had the sudden frown he had noted in her when she was reflecting. "Though of course it wouldn't be such fun if you were always alone, would it? It wouldn't be such fun" . . . she slipped unconsciously into Philip's favourite descriptive phrase of his father—"because then you'd have no one to take things out on."

Her grandfather again waited. He always asserted so openly before her his freedom from all the conventionalities of altruism that it saturated the atmosphere

she breathed. But the sound of his acidulous theories on her lips gave him for the first time an arresting impression.

"But what earthly good does it after all do, pussy, to have people think you're dreadful?"

"Now you're trying to talk like father;" her eyes held him; "and it's not a bit like you. No, I've decided. I want to make people afraid of me; because if people are afraid of you it means, of course, that they think you're wonderful."

"Wonderful!" he broke out.

"Yes. When the Salter children came to play—when father made me ask them—didn't you see they thought I was wonderful? They were terribly afraid of me—terribly; they'll never come again. You said they were just stupid; but I didn't think them stupid because they thought I was so wonderful."

Mr. Lacy's hand rested on her hair. "Of course—you know I never say anything less than all the truth to you—of course you know you *are* rather wonderful!"

"Of course I know it. But what good would it do me to be wonderful"—she always had her next idea outlined and ready—"if they didn't see how wonderful I was?"

He pushed her an inch farther. "But suppose you're not wonderful?"

"But what makes being wonderful, unless it is that people think you're wonderful? That's all that matters," she ended in her definite voice, "to make them all see how wonderful you are."

In the next weeks Mr. Lacy's thoughts often reverted to her words. They seemed to have defined for him

much that he had felt formlessly. He had progressively the sense not of Olive's development nor of the shaping of her character, but rather that her character already existed, and that her growth was to be a discovering and unfolding of tendencies established because they were complete. He had ended, on this occasion, with a realisation of the futility of combating her basic attack on people—her necessity to conquer rather than to convince them, and her imposition of herself by enforcing a recognition of her superiority. She seemed to him to have a hard spiritual concision; and even in her imitation of him, as it grew from day to day, he saw an attempt to put into practice a definiteness all her own.

He was to remember that it was one hot afternoon, in the August of the same summer, as he sat rocking in the thin shadow of the desiccated creeper which screened the verandah and fanning himself with his straw hat, that his sense of a lack, in his grandchild, of any of the preconceptions of duty reached a point of action. The western sun beat fully on him; but Norah was on the back porch, and the little house full of the drowsy flies which, at this temperature, forced their way everywhere. His physical discomfort had had some part in bringing Mr. Lacy to his moral conclusion. At times he admitted, with a sardonic regret that he must accord her this recognition, that he missed Rebecca. She had at least been able to see that the broken wire nettings at the windows were replaced and the signs of encroaching poverty to some extent tempered. It was his fate, he supposed, to have women in his life who were conveniences and not necessities. The effort at recollection was wearisome

ASCENT

to him and even his brighter memories flattened to the stale, in the listlessness of the dead air; but he was aware of wondering what one ever after all knew of the conditions of another mind, and whether his daughter-in-law had not sometimes revolted at the fact that she was condemned to be herself. The idea circled in his heavy thoughts. In the glare of the sunlight which flooded the lawn, the deserted dusty street and the open meadow across it, out to the dark line which the hills on the opposite side of the valley drew against the sky—a line heavily black in the yellow light—his eyes were ponderous and dimmed; but just before the hills rose he saw, in the haze of heat, the scintillating white points of the tombstones in the churchyard. His tired vision fixed on them; and after a few moments of thought, and with his look now changed to a resigned irony, he rose abruptly and called Olive.

She ran around a corner of the house in an instant and met him at the gate. Her hand slipped into his, she wiped her hot dark brow and drew her hat over her eyes, and her feet tried to fall into his stride. There was always, as he noticed, a happy inevitability in her way of joining him. She never expressed her pleasure, but it was more certain than any expression that she should respond so quickly and that her face should lift with such light to his. They crossed the street, on their way to strike through the meadow. The heat was so intense that it quivered like the fluctuations of a flame in the still air. The village lay immobilised. Along the street, towards the square where the Court House, the Presbyterian church, and the most populous of the shops clustered, a single sleepy wagon was drawn

ASCENT

to the curb, and the motionlessness of the horses, with their rusty tails hanging inertly under the slaughter of the flies, added to the desolation of the scene. Years and years earlier Mr. Lacy had caught himself, whenever he crossed the street, looking down its arid length with expectancy, under the low arch of the maples in summer and through the grey lacework of their boughs in winter. He never knew what he awaited, in this habit of a scrutiny less of his curiosity than of his cynicism. He would watch the iceman carry his dripping burden to the Basker gate and the baker choosing the heaviest of his pies for the Trails; and the perfection of flatness in his surroundings would enclose him anew, so that even its finality seemed to him mediocre and not tremendous.

They passed into the meadow, down the slope which, on this side of the valley, rose from its low edges, and crossed the little stream of the Ware river, so dried and silent that the frail footbridge hung high above stones which were bare and grey. In a moment more a shadow of deep green fell on Mr. Lacy's heated face and he felt like a touch the coolness of the trees in the churchyard. He pushed aside the iron gate, beckoned Olive after him through the long wild grass, and sank under a tree with a breath of relief. His hand ran for a second or two over his hair, which was still thick and vividly white and full of his rare vitality, before he turned to look at the child.

"Well, pussy, this is a place you've never been!"

"No." Olive lifted her head and sent her swift look around her; she had climbed to the top of the gravestone nearest Mr. Lacy and sat swinging her thin legs.

"No—but of course I know all about it. It's where

ASCENT

they put people when they are dead—when they can't get up and go away again. Norah never brings me in when we pass—of course I know why! She wants to keep it to frighten me with when I'm bad. I can't see that there's much to be afraid of. Why did you bring me here, grandfather?"

Mr. Lacy took his time before he answered. He had seldom been farther from his usual impulse to treat her intellectually. He was always conscious that the curiosity she inspired in him was as potent as his affection. But his dominant instinct was confused at the moment with the same loyalty which had made him take what he recognised was an absurd walk in an unbelievable heat, and his voice lowered as he spoke.

"I brought you, my dear, to try to tell you what you've lost by death. If you're to be like me, you'll want to cast up your account in life—the account of what you haven't as well as of what you have. And there's a great deal, my child, that you haven't; you've lost the irreparable thing; you've lost your mother."

She gave a quick absent nod, as if she disposed of the softness in his tone, and her eager eyes remained set on his. "Just what is a mother?" she asked.

Mr. Lacy's surprise caught him, in spite of himself. "But you must know! Everyone has a mother; it's the name given to a woman when she has a child."

"Yes, I know; but of course there must be different kinds of mothers. Most of them must be different," she ended, "from mine."

"Different . . . ?"

"Yes. Not all mothers could be what you always say she was—they simply couldn't. And father liked

her, so I suppose I shouldn't have. I suppose she was as bad—was she?—as Uncle Joseph Trail."

"My child, it doesn't matter what your mother was or wasn't. She was your mother, and she's dead. You must think of her with love, and you must think of her love for you."

"Why?" Her question shot as straight as her glance. "Just because she's dead? But what difference can that make?"

Mr. Lacy's eyes for a second returned her look. In the reverberation of his own tone, he had never been more presently struck by the fact that it was a tone, limited to an expression of personal idiosyncrasies, and not an assertion of principle. The tortuous ways of her nature had never seemed to him more visibly to underlie it, nor his own impotence more final, in the face of her crystallisation into an iron attitude.

"I don't know that it can make any difference to her. But certainly it makes some difference to you."

"How? I don't understand. Of course I like to walk with you anywhere, grandfather; but I'd really much rather have played in my swing,"—she put back her heavy hair from her forehead. "How could it make any difference to me to come here?"

"Because, my dear, you'll one day have a daughter of your own. You'll understand then—you're too little now—that to respect one's mother and to be dutiful even to her memory is one of the rules we can't break. Don't forget that. It's a rule which holds, in death as well as in living. One day, pussy, you'll be dead too."

Olive's feet continued to swing evenly against the

ASCENT

stone on which she sat. "I shan't die, myself. It would be so lonely and so dirty."

"Yes, my dear, you will." Mr. Lacy's voice had again its lower note.

"But I say I shan't."

"Ah, it's not a question, you see, of what you say!"

Her feet were abruptly still, and she raised to her grandfather a face which had a sudden pallor. "But I tell you I shan't. Why should I have to die? Has there never been anyone who didn't die—who wouldn't die? You'll see—I won't die; I won't, I won't. So there! Have you got any of those nice lemon drops in your pocket?"

She had bent forward, with one sunburnt hand stretched to him; her grandfather saw her eyes pass beyond him, and in an instant she drew back and straightened herself, with the abruptly awkward withdrawal of childhood. He turned and saw that a few feet away, advancing from the gate which gave on the road, a young man was approaching them. Mr. Lacy's rapid eyes bent for the space of a moment on him; a second later he had pulled himself to his feet and waved his hand, in a sudden recognition.

"But, by all that's wonderful, it's young John—grown up! I'd know you anywhere! How on earth did you discover me?"

Young Devon had paused beside Mr. Lacy, and he met his grasp with a cordiality which had a touch of shyness. His general impression was of length and leanness and his body lighter than seemed, in a boy of less than twenty, sufficiently solid. He held his motor cap under his arm, and his eyes, clearly grey, caught the light which penetrated the close branches.

Yes, he'd found Mr. Lacy, and rather by a miracle, since they'd told him, at the house, that it was hopeless to pursue the old gentleman and his granddaughter in their wanderings; yes, it was the first proofs of the jade catalogue he'd come about. He was with his father for a week and Devon had made him motor down, the instant the sheets arrived from the printers, for Mr. Lacy's comments. Yes, the roads were bad enough, and he had the keenest recollection of Mr. Lacy—of course—though it couldn't be less than eight or ten years since, at Wickford, he had first seen him.

"And here you've become one of these conquering youths who's going to upset the world—ah, if only you could! And this, you know, is Olive. Your father's probably told you about her—yes? Olive, come here!"

Mr. Lacy had turned, with a pride which he never allowed himself to exhibit when he considered it, and faced the child. It was the first time that he had ever noted her capacity to make one wait and, even at her age, to compel attention. Young Devon's smile, as he followed Mr. Lacy's glance, made his face shyer than before, not as if his warmth of interest were difficult to arouse but as if he were unaccustomed to admit it. Olive, perched in her raw thinness on the tombstone, regarded them with an equal blankness. Mr. Lacy's wit could have fancied that there was a touch of the mystery of her sex in her immobility. Her expression was stubborn to the point of sullenness; but it could not conceal the passion of her interest. He felt that her unwavering gaze saw every inch of the young man, his thick close hair, the faint delicacy of his throat, the kindness of his mouth and the ease of

his rather shabby clothes. She saw no less the motor waiting beyond the wall and the vista of the life to which it led—a life of mysterious happinesses and lovely adornment, half fairy-tale and half preconception; an escape, actual and thrilling, from all the enclosures of Ware.

“Come, pussy, come! You’re to shake hands, you know.” He made a helpless gesture. “You mustn’t mind her manners. She’s brought up by us two men, you see. Olive, you’re exceptionally rude”—he again broke off, confronting the child’s refusal. “Little girls are such odd imps . . .”

Young Devon’s look at her was as friendly as before. “Don’t bother her, please! And I left the proofs with your son, who was good enough to say he’d give them to you. If father may have them again in three days, by post . . .”

“Of course, of course.” Mr. Lacy nodded. “What a treat I shall have with them to-night! Did your father get the Paris jade he was after?”

“I think so—I’m not sure. As if one ever knows, you know, which particular thing father *is* after, even if he get it——!”

“Ah, he’s colossal, he and his sensitivity—and his drift! But you’ll come back with us, to the house, and let me glance at the first pages with you, before you start for home?”

“Thanks—no. I’ve sixty miles to make and bad tires. I mustn’t run it close; I’ve so little time here. I’m due in New York again to-morrow night.” His eyes again played on the dark reticence of Olive’s face. “So you don’t think she’ll make friends?”

“Olive, for the last time, do as you’re told!” Mr.

Lacy broke into irritation. "You're really inexcusably naughty!"

Young Devon's smile had suddenly faded. Mr. Lacy, in his perpetual scrutiny, saw his look touched with an abrupt surprise, an incomprehension so rooted that it blent strangely with his obvious immaturity. The boy's eyes passed rapidly from Olive to him and back to Olive; and the comparison which he divined in the quick transition of the glance made Mr. Lacy turn, in a final exasperation, on the cramped, obstinate figure. As he did so his eyes caught, beneath her stiffened legs, the name on the stone on which she sat. His own face changed.

"Good heavens, child, get down! I didn't see where you were sitting. If that's not like me; to bring you here on a theory of loyalty,—and not to have enough experience of loyalty to put it into decent execution! Get down at once! That's your mother's grave . . ."

The force of resistance in Olive wilted under their eyes. For a moment she peered down, trying to decipher, beneath her skirts, the letters and the name; then she slid inertly from the stone, and with a final conquest of her hesitation she approached them and raised her flushed face.

Devon, with a word of excuse for her and the murmur that he himself, when he was little, had always detested manners, had immediately taken her hand and held it. He was evidently again at the mercy of his natural inarticulateness and of a delicacy of consideration as inhibitive as his reticence and which dealt even with a child's exaggerations. Mr. Lacy, as he speechlessly watched them, did not know which of the two astonished him more. It was surprising enough that

Olive should affect in any way the interest of a boy of nineteen, at the most crowded time of his college life and living in a world of privilege where such incidents were scarcely noticeable; but it was still more surprising that she herself should be so affected. He had never seen her produce a look which was so clearly the result of feeling. Her eyes clung to Devon's with a heat of desperation and of anger at her own awkwardnesses and ignorances. A sudden sensation of pity stirred in Mr. Lacy; yet he recognised, with his fineness in the discovery of such indications, that it was a compassion larger than his compassion for her. It was rather a pity for the operation of that force resident in her, which could create in others the stir of feeling, and bring them, through her, into touch with what he remembered, across his years, as the flame of existence.

IV

IT had been in Olive's twentieth year, after a gradual failure through the early winter months, that old Lacy fell into his last illness.

As November and December had passed he had been more and more frequently by his fire, with his recollections growing not dimmer but slower in their pace. He was still as constant in his assertions, to his granddaughter, that his mind was more acrid and less inclined to foolish hypocrisies than ever. He dissected even his nascent atrophy and told her ceaselessly, as she sat beside him with one pointed foot on the fender and her pointed chin propped on her hand, how ignoble the decline of energy was. It was her absent smile which inspired, as he also freely asserted, his only regret at quitting life. In the last year or two, with her gradual entrance into womanhood, she had given him the sympathy of attention for which he had always searched. She was no longer an audience; she was a woman whose responses and the intelligence of whose differences of opinion one could count on. "Don't think I'm so credulous as to believe I know anything about you," he told her constantly. "You probably give me only the illusion of sympathy. But you see that's the fun of consciously permitting illusions—one can believe in them;" and Olive responded as frequently by the same smile and the same silence, while with her quick competence she shook up his pillow or stirred his broth.

Mr. Lacy was always conscious of a sense of effort when, in retrospect, he turned back to the years which had produced her maturity. There had been so little of a traceable antecedence in her outer life. He remembered the opinion he had formed in her childhood that her development would be not so much a growth as a gradual disclosure of a nature which had a certain finality and completeness. He had never discovered in her—this he could definitely say—any trace of responsiveness to forces other than her own. It was Philip's credulity that when she veered to his way of doing something she had a change of heart, and his father could imagine the confidence with which he thanked heaven for it; but he himself recognised her impermeability no less than he recognised the harshness of her determination. He recollected vividly one night a year before, when they had strolled arm and arm up and down the porch—he had not for long got beyond this boundary—and when he had suddenly broken out: "The only dull thing about you, my dear, is that you can always be explained!"

She had looked up at him in a puzzled silence, with her face first stiffening and then flushing, and he had continued: "One always knows, I mean, that you do nothing and feel nothing without a reason. Oh, I don't know your reasons, nor do I want to; but any invariable reason is a bore."

Mr. Lacy could still feel the abruptness of the gesture with which she had withdrawn her arm from his, abandoning him to his weak legs several feet from his chair; and he could still trace the defiant set of her shoulders, as she turned into the house. As his meditation became more and more his sole activity,

his memory could see, in the flames of the coals in his grate, still farther. Any breath of her inner feeling always took him, at a bound, to the hot afternoon in the churchyard and the nascent force in the face she had shown, not to him, but to the delicacy of quality which her childish instinct had leapt to recognise in young Devon. He had not forgotten his predictive sense of her power to create sensibility in others. One reason for this, as he knew, was that he had never seen it duplicated. She had for him a scrupulous devotion which included no permission to enter the processes of her feeling. Her tenderness itself was too defined a tenderness. As she had grown out of childhood, with the early intellectual development of the American girl, he could say that he had formed her, if only because her perfect duplication of his attitude had been, ever since she was old enough to take an attitude, the scandal of Philip and the Trails. But he had invariably the idea that in spite of the flawlessness of this imitation and the way her analyses and ironies went him, as he said, one better, she was nevertheless using it all as an attitude, and not as a conviction of unconviction.

Her real attention was in her silent self-absorption. He could imagine no more complete exemplification of individualism. It seemed, to his literary sense, that that cult of the personal so apparent in the women of her nation had flowered in her restless intelligence. She had what he termed to her a thoroughly trained possessiveness. To see a thing and to understand it was to own it; and to own was her point, whether the acquisition were mental or material. There was as little relaxation in the grip of her insistence as there

was change in the months of the year at Ware; and while he watched her grow into the clear outlines of character, and as her silences deepened with the evidently longer reverberations of her thoughts, Mr. Lacy felt that her inflexibility could obtain even in the starved circumstances of her surroundings.

This power to seize and to disregard all she did not want had given her, as he realised, a remarkable steadiness. He explained to himself in this way the surprising justice of her judgments. There had been, at one time, a possibility of sending her away to spend a last year at school and to prepare her for some post of teaching. Philip had ventured on a speculation which was a foregone failure, and the question dropped almost as soon as it was raised. But Mr. Lacy had had, in Olive's answer to his query if she were disappointed, another of his swift glimpses into the dim region of her mind. What would be the good of her going, she had briefly said; the demonstrable fact of how little she could get out of such an extension made any regret on his part or hers futile. Of course she meant ultimately to get away—he must see that; but not to a girl's school, where the world would be as restricted as the world of the Ware street. The school might fit her for a larger world—she supposed that was true; but how? By teaching her to teach or to be a second-rate secretary; and she asked him to consider her in such eventualities. There were of course in Ware girls who in harder circumstances and with half her intelligence got away. But they had nothing in themselves to limit the conditions of their emancipation. They didn't know bad things from good, and their ambitions were merely brief and

impulsive. When she went, she wanted to go in her own way, to a life which was on her own terms; and meanwhile she had no self-pity—she assured him he could be forever sure of that. Living with Philip, as he very well knew, knocked such softness out of one. When she went, she would go finally, to opportunities and surroundings which fitted her. Let them wait for a year or so, and see.

Her patience was all the stranger to him because of his knowledge—and, as he realised, his alone—of the white heat of her impatience. Sometimes he had the sense that not so much she as the youth in her watched him fail with slow calculation. It was never that she was hurried; he felt that she saw farther than he in her recognition that when he died she would be in many ways worse off, with the burden of the authority of the little household and her father fully on her hands. She had none of the enthusiasm of her years. The classic stir of the word freedom did not lift her beyond her hard recognition that any freedom she achieved must be crippled and partial. But it was at times miraculous to him that she could so contain not only her energy but the sense he had seen gradually develop in her of a fine susceptibility to beauty. He had been inexorable in his effort to teach her to reject all but the best and to establish an aristocracy of taste in her choices. She would go without a dress for a year, so as to buy for the little sitting room a print he and she had unearthed or to send the money she had saved to New York for a good material, with lustre and softness in its folds. Once or twice he had taken her for the day to Wickford, to lunch with the older Devon, who was

ASCENT

more and more morosely concentrated in his work; and it had surprised both men to see her light unerringly on the best jades and on their most subtle and inconspicuous beauties. She had frequently shivered, in this same winter, under a coat which was too thin. With old Norah's help he had ordered from Wickford a little fur jacket for her, and had spread it on his knees to surprise her, one night, in their habitual vigil by the fire. Olive had run her hand smoothly over the fur, while she reproached him for his extravagance; he was entirely too good and utterly outrageous, she had said; and while she talked and protested, it had flashed through Mr. Lacy's imagination that her hand was a test of the quality of what it touched, and that the fur looked coarse and poor beneath it.

He was scarcely surprised when she raised her head, with a motion of finality. "It's no use to you or to me, grandfather; let's admit it. You're trying to make out that you've a right to spend the money, and that for it you're getting what you want for me. All the time, dearest, you see as well as I do that what I need are sables. Don't let's deny it. Your goodness doesn't make this anything but second-class. You must just courageously go without the pleasure, and I must go without the coat."

"But you'll be cold, my child."

"No colder than I've been," she retorted; "and I'd rather be cold than ugly."

He looked at her with the intensity which had survived all his physical depletion. "Should you? Youth doesn't like brutal pain; and this wind's real suffering."

"But of course I should!"

"Yes—I know, I see; but it's wonderful to me," he

ASCENT

searched for his phrase, "how your love of what's lovely has grown with nothing to feed on!"

"But I myself have fed it," she had all her usual clearness.

"Yet what's so extraordinary is that you've never seen that one doesn't feed it. You don't understand that the realest sense of beauty is feeling; that it's by living the life of feeling that it's created and stimulated. No, pussy; you've no imagination."

"I've had the imagination," she smiled, with her assurance, "to own in this dreadful little house all I've had to do without."

"Yes, so long as it was sables. But you've never imagined the unimaginable. What imagination you've got is all along tactile lines. You must grasp things, you see. You grasp them by your very rejections; you grasp them by forcing them to recognise you. No, no, my dear. To look at you you're all line—line, which is the quintessence of sensitiveness; yet you're not sensitive. You've a privileged apprehension about life; yet you're not alive."

"Do you think I haven't been alive in my hatred?" Her voice had a sudden vehemence. "Do you think there's been a night that I've gone to sleep without detesting what I detest with all the force in me? that I haven't despised not only this house but every house down the street? that I haven't felt the horror of their all being alike?"

"That I admit." Mr. Lacy's tone was dry. "But you've always been the sole object in the house. It all comes back to you: that's it."

"And to whom should it come back?"

He was silent for a moment with his eyes, in the

ASCENT

gradual suffusion of his age, set on the coals. "Just what is it, Olive, that you want?"

"Want?" She had raised her head quickly, and he had never heard her speak more finally. The fingers of the hand clasped on her knee closed sharply. "But I want experience!"

Mr. Lacy nodded. He had lived with this idea close to the root of his conjectures about her; yet her confirmation of the veracity of his conclusions gave him a moment of ironic regret.

"But don't you see it's simply no use—just experience?" His look searched her. "Your experience will stop dead if it's only subjective. You yourself must be it. You've got to change, you've got to grow; and you don't grow, pussy."

"But I grow in my own ways; don't you see?" She was quick and triumphant. "I get all the more—and far more vividly—because I follow them. I'm all the richer because I won't pay."

He sighed. "Well, there it is. At my age I've nothing left but a habit of mind; at yours, you've got a philosophy. I grant it—your appetite's a science."

"You see—you admit it!" she had laid her hand lightly on his.

"But don't forget that it's a science only of appetite," he had ended, with his amused eyes on the determination of her face.

He had had one definite interest, in the year Olive was eighteen, and that was his final share, with Devon, in the completion of the catalogue of the Wickford jades. In recent years he had more and more compared Devon's solitude with his own and he had grown

in his sardonic sense of the artificiality of the one and the inexorability of the other. It was not only that Devon saw, from time to time, the progress of life in his boy—that nice boy, as old Lacy always characterised him, or that the burden of his erratic wife at least linked him to the world by the realities of its annoyance. Devon was unable to rid himself of the fact that he was in his way famous, any more than he could deny that he had had money and position to disregard in his voluntary renouncement. One never lost the consciousness, as he put it to Olive, of the things waiting around the corner for him and the privileges he could think so unimportant as to condemn them. Whenever he took her with him to Wickford he could see, by the quick shift of her eyes and the rapid deductions of her attention, how she measured this. She never laid particular stress on these visits. Yet Mr. Lacy's conviction of her inner plans and the drive of her inner purposes was immensely augmented by the way she extracted, on each occasion, every information and every possible opportunity to enlarge her world. If she scrutinised the jades, she also scrutinised Devon, as he could see by the impatient contraction of her eyebrows at the stupidities in his cleverness; and she scrutinised no less the minutest habits of the house, down to the way in which the exquisite Venetian finger bowls were placed on the torn tablecloth.

Mr. Lacy never measured how far this computation was from understanding until one morning, when he and Olive arrived to spend a few final hours with Devon over the proof sheets, they found that the younger Devon was in the little entry to greet them. He had come up from New York the night before, at

ASCENT

his father's summons, to clarify for them an obscure point the facts of which he had verified at the Metropolitan Museum, and Mr. Lacy was immediately aware of the touch of change which his lounging figure brought to the cramped, close rooms. Olive had held out her hand to him, with her swift decisiveness; and since they needed her help only at intervals, she had spent most of the morning wandering to and fro in the little garden. As the three men bent over the papers on Devon's table, Mr. Lacy felt that his companions watched no less than he for the occasional glimpses, through the open window, of her finely set shoulders and the gleam of the sun on her hair as she moved. Movement, as it seemed to him, with his eyes wandering from the sheets in front of him, expressed her essential quality. It penetrated even her silences and her suspense. Her concentration saved her from restlessness. Her motions conveyed not merely displacement but a smooth relentlessness of progress; and as she paused in the sunlight, he could trace even in her immobility the beat of her vitality.

At luncheon she was as definitely cool in her manner and as definitely separate. She smiled, with young Devon, over the renewal of their acquaintance; but she had none of the challenge which a girl of her age, dealing with a man surrounded by a glamour of the freest life, might be expected to show. She turned on him the same eyes she turned on his father and on the jades; but old Lacy had had, during the hour, a definite extension of his view of her future. As he watched the curiosity with which Devon met her, there had flashed into his memory the qualities which, a few years before, had been implicit in his face. His mental and his

physical signs had all become characterised and accentuated. He had the same light touch of charm, the same simplicities of reserve; his hands were a little longer and browner and his air of distinctiveness more marked. Mr. Lacy knew the traceable facts concerning him; of his years at the Beaux Arts, after college, and the brilliancy of his record there, and of the rapidity of his rise to importance, with his own firm of architects, in New York. Was it a distinctiveness, he wondered, which matched the strong flavour of his inner distinctiveness? or were not the two, in the current custom of his countrymen, wholly contradictory? Had he the capacity to live by the exactions of his evident taste, and to test the responsiveness of his imagination by actualities? Whatever had happened in his inner world, the old man concluded, he had kept and developed its quality. His growth would probably always be a consequent one; and he would continue to listen to his father with the same lightly amused tolerance and to finger the white jades with the same reticent pleasure.

It was in his granddaughter's return to the friendliness of the smile with which, from time to time, young Devon's eyes appealed to her, that Mr. Lacy had another measure of her. There was no obvious response in her. Her instinct was trained and tamed to caution. But he had the clearest conviction that the delicacy and susceptiveness of Devon's look confronted her like an unconscious test. She returned to it the complexity of a girl's state of mind—indifference and calculation, curiosity and negligence; but it seemed to Mr. Lacy's wit that it was Devon's fineness which marked her own incapacity. . . .

ASCENT

Mr. Lacy had fallen, on a January afternoon when the cold was bitterest and the early dusk hung like a veil of ice in the thin grey air, over the arm of his chair, with his limp figure suddenly divested of the springs of action and intelligence. It was Olive who, an hour later, found him, and who dealt with the situation with her inerrant readiness. She instructed Philip and Norah how to carry him to his room, she dispersed the two or three inquisitive neighbours, and she heard the doctor's verdict. It would be absurd to assume the expense of a nurse, she told Philip, since he could live at most only for a day or so; and with the same calculation she warned him that, as his father's mind was likely to clarify, he had better do his utmost not to irritate him by any parade of emotion, not to call in his querulous tones to Norah and not to bang the sitting room door.

It was not until the next morning that Mr. Lacy, wearily lifting his lids, saw the blur of mist which hung on them change and crystallise into her thin upright figure beside his bed. He traced vaguely the carriage of her head, the whiteness of her face, and finally the penetrating attention of her eyes. The fixity of her look recalled him to the fact of how repellent the decay of life must be, and made him dimly aware of the sudden angles which his face must have assumed and of the rigid immobility of his body.

"So—you're here!" he said faintly. "That incompetent doctor's not about, is he?"

"Oh, no, grandfather; he came last night; there was nothing more for him to do."

Mr. Lacy's eyes sharpened. "I suppose that I'm dying?"

ASCENT

She laid her hand briefly on his motionless one. "Of course, my dear; you know you've always told me that it was foolish—that it was a personal impudence—to take from people the knowledge of such things. . . ."

Mr. Lacy breathed evenly for a few seconds. His lustreless eyes appeared to follow the sunlight which quivered, through the closed blinds, on the shabby carpet. His thoughts passed, with unaccustomed heaviness, from his detestation of Wilton designs to the fact that when the light lay like this, in the Ware winters, it meant that the day was so breathlessly cold and so brilliantly still that the mere warmth of one's body, in defiance of such a temperature, was marvellous and exciting. His mind circled listlessly about this physical memory, and then his glance strayed back to the motionlessness of the coverlet across him.

"He's an extraordinary fool, that doctor," he observed.

"Yes," she nodded; "but on the whole not so great a fool—do you think?—as Mr. Basker. He, of course, wanted to come to you at once. He said to me that, now you were ill, you might be converted to a change of heart. Of course all he really wants to do"—her brows drew together—"is to have a chance to condemn you."

Mr. Lacy's lips were touched with a faint amusement. "Don't deny him his rights! Don't you see that for the first time he feels himself my superior? Oh, yes, Basker's a marvel. He has imagination and subtlety. He's been wise enough to see that the faith which is inexplicable is always invincible. Dear me, yes. It's effrontery, if you want, but it's an effrontery

ASCENT

which works with a beautiful efficiency; and the wonderful part is that he's right."

"Right? Now, grandfather"—she made a gesture of impatience—"you're not going to lose all your quality, just because . . ."

Mr. Lacy took her up, in his dim voice. "Just because I'm dying? I haven't, pussy, the least idea what I'm going to lose, and Basker has. Don't you see? He's won out and I haven't. I've nothing, after eighty years of it; he's got a prejudice strong enough to be a belief. Yes—it's my perception, by heaven, which has done for me!"

Olive's sudden movement of tenderness had a touch of awkwardness. "You've had a hard enough time."

Mr. Lacy's glance fixed her.

"Come, my dear, you're lyrical, you're absurd! I've had nothing of the sort. I didn't believe enough in anything to have a hard time because of it. No, I'm inexcusable. I've had to live the smallest life—and I've understood the terrible difference between smallness and concentration. Yet I've been content to be passionately bored; I've been so inefficient that even my mind has failed me," his voice hesitated and broke, "and years and years since all my thoughts turned into caricature . . ."

He closed his eyes. It was evident that his sense of an accumulated weariness of years, in all their separate hours and moments, broke over him like a sea. Olive's eyes could trace the actual passage, across his face, of the shadow of heaviness which mounted to his brain. The thin threads which held him quivered and strained under the pressure; and she felt the imminence of a change so close that she raised her voice, hurriedly.

ASCENT

"Grandfather, you must rouse yourself! Come, just for a moment . . . there's something I must ask you!"

"Well?" His lids lifted again, with a weaker effort.

"How can I manage? That's what I want you to tell me; what am I to do?"

"I'm not embarrassed by my death, my child." He tried to make his habitual gesture of irritation. "Don't talk like your father. I've faced all its eventualities." He eyed her for a second with a firmer fixity of attention. "Do? You know perfectly well what you mean to do."

Olive was as instant as he. "Of course I know. All I'm uncertain of is how you've arranged about the money."

Mr. Lacy appeared to consider. "You must get away at once, of course. I've left you everything."

"Get away to teach or to work in a shop?" She had bent nearer him. "No, grandfather, you really must open your eyes for a second! I shan't ever do with any half measures—you know that. If the money's mine, can I draw on the principal as long as I may need to; until, that is, I marry?"

He again tried to keep his attention on her. "Until you marry? I don't see."

"It's surprising you don't; what on earth can I do but marry? and whom can I marry but John Devon?"

"So!" Mr. Lacy had a sudden touch of his dryness. "So that's it!"

"What else could it possibly be?" She straightened the sheet with her quick touch. "Surely you must have worked it out as I have! I've no possibilities to marry anyone else."

"I suppose not . . ." Mr. Lacy wavered, and his

ASCENT

eyes suddenly cleared with energy. "No, my dear, don't do it!"

"Don't marry him? Why not?"

He tried to shake his immovable head, and his eyes took up the negation and expressed it, with unconscious pathos. "One doesn't argue with people as far down the hill as I am, pussy. Give me at least the prerogatives of dying. Take my word for it . . . don't marry him."

"But really you must tell me, grandfather. . . ."

"Oh, for a thousand reasons, but one will do. He'd make you unhappy." He frowned at the assurance of her look. "Yes, my dear, he would. I don't see how—I'm weary enough of time as it is, and I can't see down the future. But he'd make you unhappy because your only happiness is in your own terms; he'd make you unhappy," he searched for the end of his thought, "because he's too good for you."

She caught him up sharply. "But it's my only chance, to marry him; oh, I don't mean to sound unkind to you, but wouldn't it be far unkind to wait until your back was turned to contradict you? I must marry, and at once. I've lost enough precious time, as it is!"

Mr. Lacy gave an inaudible murmur, and closed his eyes again. Through the thickening haze of his intelligence he had no longer the particular sense of what she said but of its familiarity. He was conscious of hearing the echo of all she had assimilated. The thought drifted through his brain, with the dissective habit which was his strongest link with consciousness, that the full determination of her tone was a testimony not only to her reaction against Philip's indecision and

the fallacy of Rebecca's sacrifice. It was also the penalty of his own undirected force. Such revulsions of character as hers should be taught illusion. He remembered he had often told himself that romanticism alone could have saved her; and the reflection seemed to him, in his dimmed state, like a last flare of his irony.

He gathered his strength and again raised his heavy lids. As his perception cleared enough to meet her eyes, he realised that the immobility with which Olive was watching him had in it a peculiar significance. She bent an inch nearer, when his scattered energy braced itself, as if she seized at once on this clearer possibility to deal with him.

"Tell me—I should so like to know," she broke out abruptly—"what does it feel like to die?"

Mr. Lacy still returned her gaze. "Feel like? I don't understand."

"Yes, what does it feel like to realise that you're slipping into nothing, with every second that passes? Now you can see and speak, you can feel and hear; but every time the clock ticks you're a second nearer! I should think it would be dreadfully strange. . . ."

She paused, flushed with the concentration of her interest. Mr. Lacy was able to comprehend this much; and the stiffening mask of his face was touched for an instant with the malignity which had always flavoured his authority.

"My dear child"—he hesitated, but clearly from the pressure of his thoughts rather than from his debility, "what on earth's to become of you!"

Olive's eagerness dropped as suddenly as it had risen: "Of me?"

ASCENT

"Yes. You're such a surprising soul. You're all egoism, and yet you relate nothing to yourself. You speak as if you were the one person quit of it—of this grotesque necessity to die." He had a flash of his light ease. "Don't lose sight of the fact that you're dying as inevitably as I; and don't talk so impersonally of one second less."

She did not speak at once; and even in his blunted state Mr. Lacy was aware of the confused flow of feeling in her silence. The hurrying tick of the china clock on the mantel was the only sound in the room; and as his feeble look strayed to it he instinctively compared its gaudy case and its cheapness with the portentous significance it resumed. He knew, and also instinctively, that Olive was as intent on the sound as he; and he was half-prepared for the suddenness with which she rose, turned to the mantel and flung the little clock to the earth. The case fell in atoms; the works clicked feebly for a moment and then stopped.

She turned back to the bed with what Mr. Lacy faintly realised was a look of appeal. "Oh, do you suppose I'll hate it as much as that?" She spoke with the same impulsiveness.

"Of course, my dear; we put more vitality into our hatred of death than into anything else in our lives; but that's no reason for giving way to an act which puts you on the same emotional plane as Basker!" His energy seemed for an instant to concentrate itself in his eyes; then their light suddenly faded, and they became opaque and grey. "Was there anything," his voice failed with the passage of each second, "in the paper to-day? I'm very tired—I shan't take it in; but you might read to me for a bit. . . ."

V

AS Mr. Lacy himself said, in one of his last whispers to Olive, it was the completest touch of his perversity that he should die with incompetence. He passed gradually from extreme weakness into a coma whose weight lifted for rarer and rarer instants, and from that imperceptibly into death.

On the evening when she turned the flame of her candle on his face and realised that her grandfather had finally distanced the point which he claimed to have so inconsiderately delayed, Olive was aware of the depth of her breath of relief. She had laid her hand on his forehead by accident; but she kept it there without repulsion; and as she felt herself penetrated by the new tensivity of silence which, with her discovery, had filled the room, she caught herself wondering what, after all, people saw in death which was so impressive and special.

The clarity of action in her mind had submerged the last latent uncertainty of her feeling. Years ago, so long before that she had ceased to date it except as something instinct in all the processes of her growth, she had measured and arranged all her possibilities by the situation in which she must find herself on the day when Mr. Lacy's death freed her. It was not that she had regarded it as an escape from imprisonment. Her hard logic had made her see her obligation to tend him as practically as she saw the restrictions of her future. But she had understood the difficulties of her making any move in view of his age, his debility

and his dominating judgments, even more accurately than he. She had set a glance no less steady on the chances which might await her. She understood too well that she would be a foregone failure in any contacts of competition, and that her brilliancy had not yet the depth nor her tenacity the patience for a protracted struggle. Her sharpened social instinct was all against any form of a gradual achievement. She felt that she must arrest her opportunities with a firm gesture and by an innate force; and as she left Mr. Lacy's room, late that night, with Philip and one or two of the Trails busily disturbing its bare silence with their whispered comments, she had a sense of satisfaction that she had never accepted any temporary alleviation or palliative, and that even with her restlessness to drive her she had never fallen into any concessions in the standard of what she wanted to do and the kind of life she meant ultimately to achieve.

She had flung herself on her bed and lain all night face to face with these images. The noises in the house dropped into silence; and only the creaking sway of the arc-light at the corner, in a wind so gusty that it lifted the snow in blind flurries, broke on her thoughts. Now that she touched with actuality the aspect of her future, she saw how it had come to be composed. It had grown with each enrichment of her perception. Her talks with her grandfather of his youthful ardours and enthusiasms, the books she had read, the few personalities which had risen on her horizon, had always instantly related themselves to her own case. She had no more sense that their separate entities existed, as apart from some possible connection with her, than she had a sense of adventure. The details

ASCENT

of what she meant to do were as precise in her mind as the details of the arrangements she had made for the funeral and her plans as to how, in the next weeks, she could manage to see Devon. She was the last person, she thought, as she finally felt the first touch of sleep, to be tricked into any softness of imagination or to believe in any of the dangerous inaccuracies of inspiration.

She rested so little that it was largely for the sake of a few moments of quiet that she went down to the little sitting room, the following morning, half an hour before the service was to take place. As she closed the door behind her and felt the pervasive differences in the still air, heavy with the unaccustomed profusion of flowers, she realised for the first time her fatigue. They would probably—Philip and the Trails—think it due her piety to leave her here in solitude; and the last hours had made her long for nothing so much as an escape from her father's insistence on the unimportant. During the day before she had come and gone from her grandfather's room freely, with no change in the fall of her step and no attenuation in the rapid movements of her hands. Perhaps she felt the fact of his death so little because he was still so extraordinarily present. As he had lain on his bed, the only change seemed to be that he was somehow transferred to a permanence of inertness. She had even the persistent sense that he was listening and watching; and when Philip had stipulated all the details of the approaching service, she had turned impatiently out of the room, with a slam of the door which startled every corner of the house, even less for the peace of being rid of such grotesque preoccupations than to ease her

latent sense that Mr. Lacy might turn and smile at her. Philip had insisted on the funeral service,—on prayers, as she told him, which Mr. Lacy would never have prayed to a God he could never have believed in. He was ready, she could see, since he had held out for Mr. Basker, to hold out for a white marble cross with a dove perched upon it; how exquisitely amusing, she thought, her grandfather would have found the correlation between Mr. Basker and the dove. . . .

She had crossed the sitting room, to where the open coffin stood in front of the unlit hearth, and had impatiently moved the pink roses which Philip had disposed with a symmetrical hand. The faultlessness of his bad taste, she reflected, spoilt even his sorrow. As she straightened herself, with her hand still on Mr. Lacy's breast, her image in the mirror above the mantel caught her eyes and arrested her movement in the immobility of surprise.

Her wonder was so definite that it took her an instant to realise the weary familiarity of the reflected room, the walls she had tried to keep simple and the one or two portraits, testimonials to that strain in her grandfather which, as he had liked to say, showed the incipient insipidity of an aristocracy. Below them was the mass of flowers she had banked there. The sight gave her at once a sense of the appropriate background they formed, not for the horizontal black line which was the coffin, but for her figure as it rose above it. Had she ever, she wondered, seen herself before? Her mind instinctively reverted to an attempt to explain her astonishment. She had heard often from Mr. Lacy of the emotionality which death diffused

ASCENT

about it, and of the self-conscious pageantry of man's attempt, as he had called it, to hide his fear of annihilation. Or was not what startled her merely the large in the terms of the smaller, and reduced to the fact that she had never yet seen herself in such a dress? The week before, just after Mr. Lacy was taken ill, she had sent old Norah in to a Wickford shop. Her instructions had been exact; she was ordering the best mourning Wickford could produce, and she reminded Norah, who was bewildered and vaguely horrified, that she was also ordering her. She had never before seen herself look as she wanted to look, and never seen materials fine enough to keep the flatness of her back and to outline her arms in lines which had all the sensitiveness of the arms themselves. As she caught the picture in the glass, she seemed to herself to have been touched by art; not only by her unaccustomed appearance, but by her juxtaposition with the flowers behind her and the whiteness of Mr. Lacy's prostrate figure in front of her.

Her absorption was broken by a sudden sound at the door. She was conscious of some one hesitating on the threshold and of the door once more closing, and she turned from the mirror to find herself facing young Devon. The strangeness of the moment could not have marked itself more definitely for her; and she could have measured its effect entirely by its effect on him. He had made a brief, grave sign of his head to her, while he drew back against the wall to wait; but as he continued to confront her she could see that the courtesy and consideration in his face gradually disappeared, as if they were absorbed in something deeper. He had once or twice before, she thought, given her

ASCENT

back her own looks in a way which had the touch of revelation, but never so definitely as now. She saw how deeply the sight of her impressed him; and the poignancy of his impression made precise to her all the details of her beauty, as she had caught it in the glass. She could tell, by following his eyes, how delicately she carried her head and that the line from the tip of her chin down her throat was as clear as the curve of a flame. She understood the fineness of the angles of her face from the fact that not one of them let his attention go, and she felt his look touch the thinness of her eyebrows and the sensitiveness of her nostrils. The power of which she had become aware seemed to her suddenly measurable because of its influence on him; and as she dropped her eyes again to her grandfather, on whom her hand still rested, she felt that their exchange had not lacked the touch of Mr. Lacy's silent irony, to make it complete.

The door had opened again, this time with an authoritative hand, and Mr. Basker in his cassock and gown entered. The glance he gave her passed with an equal severity to Mr. Lacy's closed face. Olive gave a rapid look of calculation, to see where the richest and darkest roses were placed, and took her stand in front of them; Devon, she noticed, was directly opposite her; a few people filed into the room, headed by Philip, and the service began.

She was vaguely conscious of the succession of its opening stages and of her habitual dislike of the peculiarities of Mr. Basker's pronunciation; but no latent meaning held before the stirred curiosity in her mind. How intensely—her eyes fell again to Mr. Lacy's face—it would have interested him. She had

ASCENT

always known that she had points of loveliness; but it had needed the shock of the readjustments caused by his death and her entrance into the fight for a new kind of self-assertion to show her that no beauty counted unless it were actively used. She had learned by her sudden influence on young Devon, an influence which was demonstrable and direct; how delightfully her grandfather would have phrased it, and how neatly he would have composed his definition of the stimulus of spectators, of her overworn nerves, and of a new dress. . . .

From the pallid monotony of Mr. Basker's voice a phrase struck her; and as he proceeded her mind clung to it and heard nothing further; "for this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. . . ." Mr. Lacy would have been the first to agree with her that the consciousness of such beauty as hers made theories of survival more than ever grotesque; as if, she thought, she could be expressed in the pallor of transmutation or by a transference into spiritual significances. As the words sounded over and over in her ears she found herself looking down not at her grandfather's face but at his crossed hands; and suddenly the difference between corruption and incorruption resumed itself in them. She could not quite believe in his death when she looked at his face; it had lain so often before, in the last year, in this grey silence. But the immobility of his hands affected her intimately. Through their fine thinness she had always fancied that there ran his impatience and his detestation of any processes of thought which were not as certain and as rapid as their own movements. On the rare occasions when he touched her he had always done

so lightly, with all his quality of charm; and she remembered the brush of his fingers against her cheek as the vividdest conveyance to her of his affection.

For the first time a sensation of uncertainty caught in her throat. She instinctively turned from the open coffin, and her eyes as instinctively swept across the room and clung for the swiftest moment to Devon's. The sudden softening of her attitude and the appeal in her face were not brief enough or light enough to escape him. His own look changed, in response, to a warmer and kinder reassurance, but also to a reserve which, as her intuition saw, was deepened by the feeling behind it. With the realisation of the depth to which she had affected him, her momentary hesitation was gone; and at a sign from Philip she crossed the room, aware that Mr. Basker's voice had stopped, and went to put on her wraps for the churchyard.

"You must tell Mr. Devon to come back to the house," she had said to her father, as they turned away from the grave, just before noon; "I must give him the most recent notes on the catalogue. He's not often in Wickford, you know."

Philip left her and she remained for a moment motionless, with her eyes on the scar of upturned earth which broke the surface of the churchyard. The brilliant penetrating light of the winter midday created in her the sense of a stillness as breathless as the cold. She drew a long draught of the icy air; it seemed to her that she had never experienced so keen a feeling of excitation and suspension, and that all the shadows and attenuations of her thought had vanished in the clear vigour of action.

ASCENT

She turned as Devon approached her, in an evident response to Philip's word with him.

"It's exceedingly kind of you," he said in a lowered tone,—“and of course one so hesitates to bother you just now. . . . But if my father could have the notes, up to date, it would be an immense help to him. He's been in bed for a week; that's the only reason he's not here to-day.”

Olive nodded briefly. “Of course you must have the notes. Nothing would have annoyed my grandfather more than to be the cause of delaying them. I've understood it was essential, and I managed, yesterday, to find time to gather them together.” Her eyes met his. “I want you to tell your father—will you?—that I mean to finish grandfather's work for him. I've enough experience of it now, you know. I understand the papers backward; and I can easily run up to Wickford, for an hour or two, from time to time. . . .” She glanced at the people who were already dispersing, beyond the freshly filled grave. “Come—shall we walk? They've all gone, haven't they? . . . and the air is delicious.”

Devon made no reply except to lay her hand on his arm. It was exceedingly slippery, he said, but if she were careful they could pick their way across the snow to the path. She felt his eyes on her averted face; and she was conscious that her black furs, as they blew against her cheek, must emphasise its clear pallor.

At the outer gate she wheeled about, with her look rising from the spot they had just left to the blue-white line of the hills against the brilliant sky. “Good heavens”—she broke out—“but it makes one angry!”

She understood that Devon's surprise arrested him

for a moment; not only his surprise at the turn of her feeling, as she instantly comprehended, but at her admission of him to it. His expression, as he confronted her, made her aware of how perfect her reticence of attitude to him had always been.

“Angry?” The word evidently held him. “To think of him, do you mean—the most brilliant and delightful of people—as having to leave you when he so loved you?”

She shook her head. “Don’t you see? Don’t you feel the terrible impudence of trying to couple him with those prayers and that grave? Death—at least death is positive, final; one’s got to bear it; but to put all this weakness of sentiment into it, to try to make a beauty out of what is all cruel ugliness . . . No, no, he would have minded it even worse than he minded dying!”

She felt Devon’s eyes again on her face; what struck her at once was that he was not so much following what she said as watching her.

“You’re incredibly like him!” He seemed, as he spoke, to be answering his own thought.

She made a sharp gesture. “But don’t you see that’s just my difficulty—that I’m not? What’s to become of me, I’d like to know? Here he’s trained me, whipped me into all his disbeliefs, dropped them slowly, one by one, into my thoughts until I’m all his system; and yet I’m myself. I’m a young woman, and not an old man. I’ve no power of distortion about death. It means to me just the horror of his dying, the loss of the person who’s shaped me and made me, and who yet was to leave me when I most needed him. I’ve no power of distortion about life. Yet

somehow I've got to live . . .” She caught herself up. “I can't imagine why I impose these things on you, Mr. Devon. We're after all complete strangers to each other. Come, and if there's time before your train I'll show how I've worked out grandfather's additions to the last section.”

They walked in silence for some moments, and it was not until they struck into the white waste of the village street that Devon spoke. “You've no plans?”

“None.” Her brevity was as sharp as Mr. Lacy's. “For the next months I must stay where I am. We own the house, you understand. It is entirely a question of money. My father and I cannot separate and do much more than keep alive; you see—” she gave her quick smile—“I'm not like a girl who's reached life through companions and dances, good times and all that. I'm the result of his old close tradition, and it makes the usual people hate the thing they can't understand in me as they hated it in him. He always told me I'd find the world just as hard as I found Ware; and I'd rather, I sometimes think, sit here and read, and if I've got to be smothered, at least be smothered in dignity and privacy. . . .”

“Perhaps you'll find that his affairs—” he began.

“I shall find nothing. I know everything there is to know. If we can sell the house and if father's investments haven't been too unwise, then we might leave here. But I quite plainly see”—her tone permitted no attenuation—“that it's extremely uncertain.”

Devon shot a glance at her. “I've thought each one of the few times I've seen you, Miss Lacy, that it's a tragic thing, for anyone like you—to have to live only in the future.”

ASCENT

"I never live in the future." They had paused at the gate, and she raised her eyes directly to his. "You're entirely wrong. I live in this moment, and in its facts rather than in its possibilities. I'm not to be pitied—I've my own scale of things. Please have no illusions about me; I have none about myself."

"Haven't you? I wonder . . ." He broke off. He was half smiling, as if he had the tolerance of his experience for her tone, and his look strayed for a moment back to the undulating fall of the glistening meadow. Olive understood the compound of amusement and sympathy in his voice; but what she instantly felt was the slip of his attention. An instinctive tenacity touched the corners of her lips. She hesitated for a second, while her black-gloved finger slowly traced a furrow on the powdery snow which crowned the gate post, and her colour faintly rose.

"I suppose you're like the rest!" she abruptly said. "You think I've no heart! Well, perhaps I haven't. But he was the only being who was close to me, who pitied me even when he didn't understand me. I loved him in my own way and I shall mourn him in my own way. . . ."

She raised her hand uncertainly to her forehead. "We had better go over the papers at once; my head is very tired—;" she stopped. A tear had fallen to her cheek, and as she felt its touch she was aware that she had recaptured Devon's interest. His admiration again vividly lit the eyes he turned to her. As he hurriedly murmured that he'd been all wrong to let her delay, that she must come in at once and rest, she knew that she had found her way to the note which would invariably move him. His critical judg-

ASCENT

ments were evidently not strong enough to withstand his response to a charm and his ready rise to a sympathy. Yet as they went up the trodden path to the door her grandfather flashed again through her mind. He would probably have said, with one of his swift contexts of thought, she reflected, that it served her right for disregarding his warning about young Devon that in order to play on his feelings she was forced to play on her own.

VI

DEVON had flung himself back in his seat, when he found himself in the late afternoon train which was to take him to Wickford; and as he watched the wintry country stream past him, his few and scattered hours with Olive Lacy had run together in his thoughts and, linked by the events of the day, had assumed their own sequence.

He had been aware, since his first moment with her that morning, of having something deeper than his interest so intimately involved that he wanted to think; and when he could at last give himself up to his thoughts, some sense of the largeness of the issues concerned came to him in the fact that his reflections did not cling so much about her as about himself. She had already raised in him questions which dealt with the fibre of his life; and the lift of the beauty in her eyes and the sharpness of intolerance in her voice had stirred his old uncertainties, roused new curiosities and touched in the dimmer regions of his mind doubts which he had never quite known whether to greet with a sceptical amusement or to call inspiring visions.

This border land in his thoughts was one of the countries where he had most lived. He never remembered his childhood and his first stirrings of consciousness without an equal remembrance of a territory of his own, where he could retreat to have his own good times. Farthest back of all in his memory, it was a place where one was merely let alone, where his

ASCENT

mother's periodic accessions of interest could not bother him and where his father's sudden disciplinary excesses could not be an obstacle to his plans. Later his private world had changed to a place to which one went, consciously performing the journey and arriving at a delightful spot where there was complete safety from interruption because no one else knew the trick of admission. His sense of self-preservation had vaguely linked itself with his childish imagination, and he had understood that to maintain his privacy and to make at will his retreats to it was the easiest means of existence. For one thing, it stopped that perpetual appeal to him which, as he had early realised, was the single point his parents had in common. His instinct was too quick not to divine that all they wanted, in their sporadic claims on his affection, was to put each other in the wrong. He could still remember the day—and he knew it, now, as having been for all three of them an occasion—when, sitting at table between them, he had glanced from his mother's futile prettiness, somehow more galling, as her husband said, than anything about her, to the equal futility of his father's cleverness and made the choice of his independence; and when they finally separated and he lived, at such times when he was not at school, first with one and then with the other, he gradually understood that his neutrality had not only protected him but had led him to develop a life of his own.

The first results of this determination not to fall into a partisanship were that he should apply to his surroundings a steady criticism. But for more years than his mental activity had been clear, and because of his sensitiveness, he had measured what he had

ASCENT

sacrificed in reaching this point. He had been deprived not only of the warmth of direct relationships. His loss was of a kind beyond mitigation; and as he matured he had realised the price of too compressed and constricted a development, and that instead of falling easily into his natural indifference he had had to rely on its armour too often. The few ideas which reached growth and fruition in him, under these circumstances, had had too concentrated a force. After his first year at college, a year which an easy popularity had made specially broadening, he had made his accustomed journey, from his mother's ornate apartment in New York to the shabby sitting room at Wickford, with a dry amusement and with the sense that anything was better than to have run the risk of changing all his points of view with the actual transit in the railway. His parents remained very much as his childish justness of vision had seen them; they were as incapable of foregoing a mutual domestic existence even in separation, and of keeping a silence or of making an omission. He grew even to feel that the jades weren't real, and that they existed solely as crystallised symbols of his father's refusal to deal directly with life.

As a consequence of this indefiniteness of trend in his development, and of too definite revulsions in himself, Devon had lacked even more than the usual young American a plan of existence and of action. A natural aptitude for architecture had determined his drift to Paris. His years at the Beaux Arts had been full of charm, but with the same absence of direction. He sometimes caught himself wondering at the unevennesses in his maturity. He was so without the fire of

belief, so content with the idle sense of the charm of the present, so habituated to see ultimate rather than temporary values in what either waked the youthful scepticism of his contemporaries or stirred them to enthusiasm. Yet he was innately conscious of carrying within himself a clear definiteness of acceptance and rejection and an immediacy of action in the judgments of his taste, which were either, he supposed, very ignorant or very astute.

Most of his companions took the life like the usual temporarily denationalised young Americans. There was not yet war in the air, to stimulate their sense of conduct and to give it new proportions; and there still survived some of the former traditions of excess, rather tame and artificial, as it seemed to Devon, and lacking in personality. He was amused by these accidents and he shared them, but with his sense of detachment clearer than ever. Something in the tone of Paris struck him as a standard. The instinct for order and loveliness affected him intimately. The living beauty of the grey streets, the penetrative sense of art which he discovered anywhere and everywhere, the modeled compactness of the French life, as every now and then he brushed close to it, were like a tonic to his instinctive differentiations. The young men with whom he found himself became externally more of this existence than he. They achieved their accent and their slang and their passionate French prejudices, whether for an idea, for a supposititious form of socialism or for a love affair. He felt himself more fundamentally touched. He had his national lack of a formative morality and his national ease in adapting himself to extraneous circumstances; and as the months passed

ASCENT

he gradually understood that he was becoming a citizen of everywhere. Sometimes he went to Venice for the autumn exhibitions, and saw the pictures with eyes more and more certainly and easily sophisticated. He spent one September vacation in the flame-like air of northern Tunis, he knew where there was good swimming all along the Schleswig coast; and one spring, after a successful examination, he took the trans-Siberian to Port Arthur, before going back to begin his work in a New York office.

He left friends everywhere, but he carried away no sense of something added to himself. He recognised the carnival of the moment, but he did not feel it. The one or two more delicate relations with women which had lightened and deepened these years made this truth more than ever evident to him. Once or twice he had been completely careless of everything but his happiness. But he was never able to rid himself of the latent reactions of a chivalry rooted in his fineness of fibre, of a question of all temporary certainties and of doubts which required a visible response. He had begun, he knew, with the only kind of metaphysics of which a boy is capable, and which had brought him to a reliance on his perpetually active instinct rather than on actualities; and he had ended—where? At an added capacity, or at only added exactions from his sensitiveness? Something profounder than the present stirred in him, as he followed, from the train window, the processes of change in the twilight. He felt Olive scarcely as much as he felt her mystery, and her mystery scarcely as much as the mystery of all feeling. He asked himself, for the first time in his experience, whether the human relation is ever an end in itself,

ASCENT

or whether it serves only its part in the sequences of larger revelations. The shadows on the white world he watched grew from blue to violet and the evening came in a grey pallor; and suddenly his sense of the impermanence of the wide American landscape was lifted and lit by her qualities. The brilliancy of her possibilities revived his original inspiration of an adventurous future and her aloofness ran out, with the fading light, into the tenuosities of the dusk. His imagination, he supposed, with the accustomed arrest of his self-derision, would of course have to fasten itself to a woman, and to a woman with so clear a moral need. But he caught himself wondering if he should ever recognise the force which penetrated and possessed all capacity, which should put another person between him and his thought itself; which should be so alive that it was always in need of new conquest, yet so intimately his that there was no separation of entity.

Before he left Wickford, Devon managed to delay his departure twice. Each time it was after he had had an unexpected meeting with Olive. Once she had come to luncheon, in response to a telephone message from his father, who was rapidly absorbing from her the details of the indispensable aid old Lacy had given him, and explained to them some intricacy in her grandfather's notes on the catalogue. He did not know whether it were because of his own sense of a consideration due her or because of some light implication in herself; but all through the hour he had felt her to be completely unapproachable. She glanced briefly at him, every now and then, across a bowl of red carnations which his father had arranged in a sudden

ASCENT

attempt at ceremony; and her hands reached out to touch the flowers, in the pauses of the conversation. The sense of her aloofness brought her poignantly close to him. He felt his fancy rise and play on the smallest things about her,—the movement of her dress, the way her fingers closed about the stem of her wine glass, with the colour suddenly deepening, under the pressure, at their tips, the lighter brown which the folds of her black veil brought out in her hair, and the clear sharp line of her cheek and chin as she turned her head. Just before they rose she bent forward to take one of the flowers from the bowl, and drew it through the knot of crepe on her dress, where it lay against her bare throat. He could not have said there was the smallest display in the gesture. Her compactness of action showed a premeditation deeper than self-consciousness. All that she did seemed to him a fundamental expression of her quality. The flower in her dress was no more implicative of her than the thorough technical grasp she showed of the matters in question. Part of her magnificence of energy, he felt, was that she had nothing old or tempered in her, no abnegations, no concessions and no antecedent restrictions, and that she was resumed in the positive play of her force.

She had glanced at her watch, about three o'clock, and his father, with one of his quick, irritable glances, had left them to put together some papers which she was to take back to Ware. Devon had instantly spoken to her in a different key, aware that the moment they were alone there was a sudden progress in their exchange.

ASCENT

"I know these things must seem horribly dry to you; but father's so set on it . . ."

"Nothing is easier than for me to look over the papers for him. I have nothing to do, you must remember; now my days and nights are blank spaces."

She spoke with the coldest clearness. Devon had never felt more penetratively the hard capacity in her voice. He held his next words for a moment. His elbow was on the mantel, and his eyes rose from the wood fire, in the gaudily tiled grate, to follow her action as she stood beside him. She had begun to draw on her long black gloves. Her hands slipped smoothly into one and the other; and he saw the kid take the modelling first of her fingers and then of the fine lines about her wrists. He recalled his thoughts with an effort.

"But you're a marvel, Miss Lacy. You'll never have blank spaces. It's only us drifting people who fall into them."

"Oh, if I have them, it's because I mean to have them. Grandfather scarcely taught one, you know, to drift!"

"It's an absurd word to use in connection with you!" He spoke to himself as much as to her, and as he again raised his eyes to glance at her he saw that her face had stiffened to its look of bitterness.

"Is it? You know more about it all than I do. You've seen things, done things. If I ever do get to a larger life, how am I to free myself? How am I to spread my wings and fly? Has one ever, after all, what one calls control?" Her shoulders rose and fell. "No, no. At the end it comes back to drift, after all."

ASCENT

"Ah, not with a person like you!" he paused. "You're freer than all the rest of us."

"Am I?" Her dry amusement lit her eyes. "Do you really believe that, Mr. Devon? If you do, you're less clever than I thought you. You've fatally declared yourself—declared yourself immune from my kind of bondage. No—" she raised her hand—"I'm sure you want to be understanding and all that. I'm not alluding just to the facts that I've my father and that I've my lack of money. I'm alluding to things in my nature which—I sometimes think—will always keep me from freedom; demands, intolerances. . . ."

She turned abruptly away. Even the sharpness of her movement had its charm for him. He was keenly aware of every element in her fluctuations; they stirred his curiosity and intrigued his mind. He wondered, suddenly, if she could not be taught to feel all the finest range of feeling; whether that force in her which was still incomprehensible could not be clarified and defined by arousing her sentiment. For a second, the strangeness of which was definite to him, he seemed to pierce, in his rapidly moving thought, the enclosure about her immaturity, as if he had turned a bright light on the surface of a seemingly impenetrable wall and found it to be made of crystal.

It was after this talk with her that Devon decided to linger two or three weeks longer with his father; not with any definite hope that he should immediately see her again, but with a vague pleasure in her comparative nearness, in the letters which each day's post brought from her to his father, and an indefinable sense that he shared something in her existence when he felt, in Wickford, the same storms which must

ASCENT

sweep with such white fury along the Ware valley. He was aware that she was daily and hourly more pervasively penetrating his thought and rapidly becoming more personal to him. Where his intelligence had formerly dealt with her, he now found himself instinctively reverting to the scent which had clung to his hand, after her hand had touched it, and the way her eyes, in their rare moments of softness, rested in his. The imprecision which hung about his judgment of her laid a constant touch on his curiosity; and as a still negative power, which he did not yet acknowledge, she had a wider influence than if he had completely accepted her.

He was conscious that his father's eyes frequently followed him, in a silence even less implicative than usual. Their lack of any of the established habit of exchange had never been more exposed. One night, however, with one of his unexpected turns, Devon had raised his head suddenly from the papers which were tossed over his desk to say: "I suppose you think that because I've no use for your mother, I've no use for all women!"

The younger Devon, who was smoking on the other side of the table, put a finger in the pages of his book and smiled. "Well—no. I shouldn't have thought that. It always strikes me that you resent mother rather than you hate her; after all, her chief fault is that she never gives one anything to condemn her for."

Devon nodded. "All premises fail where your mother's concerned. She's not real. But there's one thing about her . . ." he waited; "her selfishness has always been traceable, petty—oh, rather ridiculous. I'm not sure that that Lacy girl's will be as harmless.

ASCENT

She's got in her the only element," he chose his words, "which civilisation's been powerless to modify—her instinct of fight. She'll fight to get what she wants, she'll fight to impose herself."

His son had flushed slightly. "I suppose you're warning me. I might remind you, mightn't I? that for a good many years I've been ready to take the consequences of what I do."

"Oh, it's never any good warning a chap with a nature like yours—all indifference outside and hardness in. I might remind you, in my turn, that it's not my habit to bay at the moon. Nor do I think you'll be fool enough to think you can train and tame an instinct as strong as that. You've enough psychology in you, I suppose, to know the definition of conversion! But I don't want to see her impose on that streak in you which responds to the fluid things in life . . . to questions, to chances, to lost causes—" He had hesitated again. "You're not a poet, John, but you've got a sense of poetry."

"Then I owe it to the jades," his son had flung back, with his light smile.

Devon laid his hand on the froth-like white surface of the little ornament which, on its black base, stood always at his elbow. "As if there could be any doubt of that! But they've been enough for me, the jades; I've had them because they've so completely had me. What you need, in life, is something like them. You need a purpose; you need both its guidance and its restraint."

"I rather think," young Devon still kept his flush, "that I also need its magnificence."

"Well, you'll not get that from any woman;" he

laid a long finger on his jade. "The Olive Lacys of the world are after all only a guide in reaching this kind of thing."

"They may be a guide in reaching feeling," retorted the younger man easily; "and feeling's even closer to art than jades."

His father gave him a final silent look; his only reply was to murmur that he'd talked so much that his cigar had gone out; and a second later he was bent again, in his habitual absorption, over his books.

It was one afternoon in early March, when the snow was turning to opaque grey water and the noise of the clanging trolleys and the jostling drays had never seemed to him more intolerably full of the reverberations of a provincial town, that Devon turned into a little Catholic church, the clerestory of which had lately been lifted and widened by one of his firm. He sat in the darkest part of the nave, grateful for the sudden silence; and almost at once he became aware that both the gloom and the stillness were charged with a personal significance for him and that a few feet in front of him Olive was kneeling. She was the single living presence in the dim light; and she knelt, as he thought, with all her aspect of mystery. The fall of her shoulders and the lines of her long arms, as she had bent them to clasp her hands, had sharp significant angles, and he was struck at once by how beautiful a background so full a surrounding made for her beauty. Even in the passage of the swift instants, he was conscious of the suggestion of drama in her impact with an age-old belief. A church had always meant to Devon, as to many men of his type, only an attempt at dogmatisation to which he could not see

ASCENT

himself subscribe. Yet he knew that in any belief which has for centuries had the accrued allegiances of human piety, there must be an immeasurable knowledge of good and evil; that the history of Christianity was a development of individuality in order that the individual might be sacrificed, and that in the light of these verities there must be rules and precedents which judged, more fundamentally than he could, even so special a person as she. Her ignorance had never yet so caught and claimed his pity as in the instants while he watched her. It seemed to him that there existed too final a separation between her and any act of prayer. He found himself gripped by the wish that he could have been surer of what her motive might have been, in coming there; and as he slipped out, abandoning her to whatever her communion was, old Lacy rose vividly in his mind and he wondered what any deity could conceivably be, to whom she could bring herself to pray.

VII

“**Y**OU know, it’s a wonder to me why on earth you came!”

As she spoke, Olive had turned to Devon in the seat of the motor, so close to him that her wrap brushed against his arm. He could see the raillery in her eyes and the accent at the corners of her lips; and it occurred to him, with a touch of surprise, that the arresting thing about her words should be their complete lack of either challenge or appeal, and the vivid ring of their truth.

He had motored down, in the same morning, from Wickford, where he had arrived only the day before. For more than two months he had imagined their meeting; it had hung before him through the last weeks of a busy winter, tinged all his activities with the colour of its possibilities, and made his silences replete. From the time he had left Wickford, in early March, these pictures had arisen in his mind. He could close his eyes and see the manner in which her light self-possession would hold, the quick surprise of her smile and the way her eyebrows might rise, with their habitual suggestion scarcely so much of a tangible astonishment and more as if she were struck, within herself, by what no one else was agile enough to see. When he had greeted her, an hour before, following close on the heels of the telegram he had sent her, she had been so like his vision of her, in all its forms, that the confirmation was a delicate shock

of pleasure. She was sitting in front of the little coal fire, in what had been Mr. Lacy's chair, and she had not risen as he entered. She merely turned, to look over her shoulder at him, with her book laid on her knee and her hands clasped on it; and her eyebrows had lifted and her smile run over her face just as his imagination had prophesied.

"So you're really here!" she exclaimed.

"But surely you got my wire, saying I'd reached Wickford last night, and that I'd arrive—if you didn't mind—early this afternoon!"

"Oh, it was the wire that put the final touch to my disbelief! Before—since you left—you'd been just someone I remembered to have seen, someone whom I could believe in because you were so far off. The wire made you positive and human, something which I knew must go wrong because," her touch was lightness itself, "it would be too nice if it came true."

Devon still held the hand she had given him. "Has everything gone wrong since I've seen you?"

"How could everything go wrong when nothing whatever has happened?" she had rejoined easily; then she had suddenly risen, with her book falling to the floor. "If you knew how tired I am of this room! Have you your motor here—yes? Do you think it's too cold for you to drive me out to the hills somewhere, so that I can draw breath? No? Very well, then . . ."

She had spoken very little while they ran along the long Ware road which bent to the south except, every now and then, to direct him. "There's a road—not too rough—which goes back and up amongst the hills; at least we shan't meet Ware on it! Long Hill—you must have heard of it; it's the hill you see to the east,

ASCENT

from the train. With a car like this we can get easily to within a climb of the summit; and perhaps we shan't be too late for an early sunset."

They had struck from the highway a mile or so out of the village and turned, as she had predicted, into a little travelled road which at once became steep. In the pale green of May, the fields which rippled away on either hand showed the rich brown of the soil between the young shoots. The sun was in their faces, and everywhere the clear shadowless light fell with the delicate spring radiance. The sharpness which still hung in the air blent with the smell of fresh earth and the swollen flow of a stream, to the right of the road. But even in this season, when the stir of cultivation was only in its first flush, Devon saw how speedily the country became stern. The fields were poorer and the pastures rougher with the miles; and finally there was visible only a solitary farmhouse of battered grey boards, with its barns in decay and its curtainless windows half broken, as if it stood as a final attestation of the hopelessness of maintaining the decencies of life in such difficult conditions. When this fell behind them the road itself became a track; and half a mile further Olive motioned him to stop.

She had briefly nodded when he asked if she were able for the climb, and he had helped her over the broken remains of a stone wall and seen her bend herself for the ascent. The slant of the hill was now so steep that, as she preceded him, he could see her outlined against the blue-grey sky. He traced the nervous fineness of all her movements, the flexibility of her thin ankles and the free sway of her waist. Every now and then she shook her head silently, to his

ASCENT

remonstrance that she mustn't try it too fast. They had made their way for perhaps fifty yards, over ground which grew every instant more broken, when he began to divine that their destination was at hand. Turning back, he could see the sides of the eminence fall away in contours which immediately below them were steep, but which beyond that dropped with the long undulations of the base of a mountain. The country below was wrapped in a pale veil of light, scarcely a mist as much as an exhalation of the earth. The green was so soft that it verged on grey and the grey, in the distances, had the tenuosity of silver. A suspense like the suspense of premonition lay on the far fields; and over the desiccated stretches nearer them, the stillness hung like a last breath of winter.

As they paused Devon saw Olive's eyes sweep the horizon. Throughout the climb she had kept the clear pallor which he thought her greatest beauty; and he gave himself time to trace in the quiver of her throat her quickened breathing, before he spoke.

"But of course you knew I'd come!" he broke out, as he recovered from the pressure of his thoughts. "It's been sufficiently obvious—hasn't it?—that I'd have to!"

"Sometimes I've felt so sure you wouldn't" . . . she hesitated and waited.

"Tell me," said Devon abruptly, "have you thought of me at all, in these last weeks? What have you done? What haven't you done?"

"What have I done—!" Her eyes were still restlessly searching the outline, against the sky, of the farthest hills. "I've tried to hold life together. That sounds absurd to you, doesn't it? I've tried to deal

ASCENT

with all sorts of little things, and littlest of all my father. You don't know my father! Poor dear, he's rather dreadful! If I were a sentimentalist, I should say I'd tried to keep from going mad from loneliness; as it is, I'll say I've been reduced to being careful to dress myself every night for dinner, as if it were a real dinner. That's how one keeps up, you know—when one's very miserable—the thing called courage."

His sense of an irony in her appeal seemed to him to rise and fall with the variant inflexions of her voice.

"At least you've known," he said in a lowered tone, "that there was one person whose thoughts clung about whatever you did."

Her eyes brushed quickly over him for an instant and then returned to the distance. "Have I? And what reason had I to know it? I'm not a person to build castles in Spain; I'm too used to the brutalities of fact."

"But you've guessed all I felt—all it was only considerate to you to feel—of the obligation not to hurry you. You're far younger than I, you're completely alone, and you've had this winter a great loss. But you've known—you must have known—all that was under my silence."

She shook her head. "I've known nothing. I haven't myself, those delicacies of imagination and of feeling. . . ."

She stopped. Devon felt the tensivity of her pause; and suddenly he was aware that she was quivering and that her hands had rigidly clasped each other. She wheeled around upon him, with her face darkened.

"I don't see why I came here!" she exclaimed. "I've always detested this place—always. Grandfather and

I sometimes drove up, in summer, in the last years he was strong, and he made phrases about the illusion of distance and the bad poetry that the mere mass of the mountains inspired, and all that. But I always hated it, even when I was tiny; it's always made me feel helpless, reduced to nothing . . .”

She broke her phrase sharply. “You mustn’t marry me—no, you mustn’t want to. It will spoil everything for you. Can’t you see that I’m I—that I can’t be your idea of me? I’m governed by laws of my own, and they’re not yours. Oh, don’t think I’ve lost my senses. I know what it would mean.” She flung back her head. “No, I tell you it’s hopeless.”

Devon had laid his hands on her shoulders. Her face swam uncertainly before him. His eyes were full of the effulgence of that future which, in an instant, had sprung into being and lay extended at his feet like the spread beauties of the country below. Through it all there stood out in his mind the fact that the instinct of his nascent tenderness had been right. She wasn’t only the compound of her confused inheritances. What had beckoned him on, what he felt he might call the pilgrim soul in her, was extant and real. In their briefest talks and in her sharpest manner, it had survived. If it had been sometimes submerged, he saw that it had never been completely absent, and the generosity of her gesture had thrown it into sudden light.

She continued to look at him, with so absorbed a fixity that it seemed to him to expose all her mind, in a simplicity which touched the elemental. Beneath his hands, as he still held her and as he heard himself reassure and quiet her, he could feel the subsidence of the storm which had swept her, as if its gust were

ASCENT

going; and when, a moment later, she bent her head and began to cry, he understood his conquest of her resolution.

He felt it all the more evident a sign of the depths to which she had been shaken that she did not speak. Her silence to him was as replete as her acquiescence. He had never thought her lovelier than at this moment, with both her physical and mental rigidity collapsed and all the fluidity of her youth apparent. As they turned to go down the hill, with their silence still holding, Devon looked behind him. There seemed to him to be, in the violet and green beauty of the spring evening, some quality which gave it an entity and almost a heart. The farthest hills had in their outline a sudden poignancy of loveliness, whose quality corresponded with the difficult and mute stages of his disparate life and its final flow into a definite channel. The tremulously still tree tops below had the delicate movement, as it struck him, of nascent feeling. The isolation itself enclosed them with the sense of a wide sympathy; and he felt that in looking back he would always think of the hour and the place as having had a definite personification, large enough to measure the spaces of his own dedication and yet so nearly human that they were like a warm hand laid on his happiness.

Olive had said nothing more than a low word of thanks, when he put her into her seat in the car and folded the rugs over her knees. Between her soft hat and the high collar of her furs, Devon could see that her face was white with fatigue and her eyes sombre. The light was fading with the instants, and they began, with some difficulty, to make their slow way down.

ASCENT

Once or twice he turned to satisfy himself that she was covered and shielded, and then he relapsed again into all the tacit implications of their silence.

The track had merged into the rough beginnings of a road when Devon paused to deal with some difficulty in switching on the lights of the car. As he drew up the noise of hoofs disengaged itself from the whirl of the engine, and an open trap approached them from the left. There was from that direction scarcely more of a road than that which lay in front of them; but as his eyes penetrated the obscurity he saw that it led to the half-shattered farmhouse which he had noticed during their ascent. There was no light visible and he could discern only its broken outline, against a sky which was almost as dark as the roof; but he made out that in the doorway stood a tall woman, the gleam of whose face and hands he could trace, and who was watching the road with an absorption of curiosity which might be expected in so desolate a spot.

The trap had now reached the point where the two paths converged, and its driver stopped with the evident intention of letting the car precede. A voice, coming through the dusk, struck Devon with the surprise of complete incongruity, in its loud note of a friendly cheerfulness.

"Why, Olive, it's you! To think of it! It's a long enough ride, isn't it?—even for people as used to it as I am. I don't see that they've done much to the roads this spring, do you? I tell father there's not much good in his being a Selectman. No, don't bother about me; please go on ahead! I've no lantern, but that doesn't matter. The light'll last long enough. Good

night!" The driver evidently turned over her shoulder. "Good night, Lizzie!"

The light wagon rattled to one side; Devon started the car, and in a second they had passed beyond it. He was absorbing himself in the difficulties of progress over the roughened road-bed when he became aware that Olive's hand lay on his arm.

"Abby!" she said, with her voice still low. "Of all impossibilities! Abby, coming up here to see Lizzie Truslow . . ."

"Who's Abby, my dear child? And whoever she is, why should she so surprise you?"

"Abby, if you must know, is my cousin." The softness of her tone had diminished. "She's the only daughter—the round, middle-aged daughter—of Uncle Joseph Trail, who's the breath of Ware. There's not an angle to her mind, not a hope for her. They live, she and her father, in a house which is considered the best house in Ware. Abby guides the taste of the Book Club, she tells them what music to buy for their pianolas; and to think of her here . . . !"

"Still, I don't see . . . ," said Devon.

"You'd see if you saw Uncle Joseph Trail. No—he simply can't know she comes! Otherwise it's past imagination. Uncle Joseph sweeps the Lizzie Truslows out of his life as he'd sweep the mud from his doorstep. And that when all Ware—at his orders—stoned her, Abby should actually come to see her, and evidently often. . . . It's beyond solution! Lizzie, you see," her eyes were hard with her amusement as they turned to him, through the dim light, "is what grandfather used to call the fine perfection of a sinner."

Devon, with his free hand, pulled her rugs more

ASCENT

closely about her. "I must say I think it's rather nice of her—of your cousin, you know."

He heard that her intonation had changed to a quality like the glance he had caught from her. "I suspect you're a person who is imposed on by those things! Abbys and Lizzies—they're made for each other; one to commit sins, and the other to rescue. Abby must be developing what grandfather loved to define as the dangerous imagination of uninstructed people; and Lizzie, I suppose, relives the pleasure of all the dreadful things she did, when she confesses them!" He felt again the touch of her look. "I suppose you think it's too scandalous—to see things as clearly as that!"

Devon's smile hesitated. "You'll not trick me into condemning you. I think it's only very ignorant."

"Perhaps it is!" She turned away, restlessly. "Yes, you turn here. You must drive me back to realities now. And you must stay to dine and see father. I know it will be ridiculous because everything he does is ridiculous; but I suppose it's necessary. . . . Can you ever forgive me for bringing you this long way? And at the end of it—" she drew a quick sigh,—
"you've found only an illusion of me!"

The throng of impressions and sensations in him was too varied for him to answer her. Before they turned into the lighter high road and left the shadows sinking into the hills, he drew together her bare fingers and kissed them. There was something peculiarly sympathetic to him in the fact that this should be the first sign of his feeling since he had acknowledged it. The act held all of the quality which was its foundation; and the light responsive pressure of her hand against

his lips made him think of her eyes as they had questioned the spaces of the horizon.

He had never imagined her lovelier than when she came down and took her seat opposite her father in the narrow dining room. To see her in the mediocrity of the house was to have their incongruity made precise and visible; that had struck him long before, and the contrast of the aged artistocratic streak in her with what was so perfectly specious. Her hands and her carriage marked the drama between themselves and Ware as old Lacy's diatribes had never marked it, and its futile waste had never seemed to Devon more obvious. She had in her, he thought, the aggressive force which reduced the accompaniments of life to a background. He could fancy that as she made even this ugliness unnoticeable, so she would also reduce, in its different degree, a surrounding of beauty to outline her own beauty. But as he watched the high poise of her head he wondered if what most of all made that beauty was not her spirited readiness to battle with any future. Would all of her life be in terms of conquest? He felt himself caught by the question. The clearance of her feeling had been like the clearance of a sky. Not a trace of her softness was left; and as he listened to her Devon recognised that her lucidity had its keenest edge, as if a night of wind and rain had been succeeded, as he had often seen it in the Ware valleys, by the magnificence of a north-west day. Yet here too she had her effect of poignancy for him. Beneath the brilliancy of happiness in her eyes, the tonic of her excitement and her amusement at the astonished pleasure of Philip and her old nurse, there seemed to him to underlie, more visibly than he had

ASCENT

ever seen it, her suggestion of a gallantry which had the touch of a light desperation in its confidence.

Philip fixed him over his glasses, with an apparent incapacity to cease his murmur that it was all very extraordinary. He shook his head, with no attempt to reply to Olive's gay assurances that it was really the only orthodox thing she'd ever done—to be engaged to be married. All he needed, she said, was someone to whom he could talk about it, and once he put it into his own phrases of sentiment, it would all seem quite simple. What evidently disconcerted him more than the note to which he was so palpably accustomed was Devon's treatment of him. Devon had begun to talk of the country from the point of its formation, asked Philip a question or two, and drawn from him answers about quarrying, in that part of the state, which, as an architect, he said he ought to be ashamed not to have known. Would Philip tell him more of the things he had picked up, from the gossip of the outlying farmers who drove in at times to Ware and who must know all about the lay of the land and the composition of the soil? He was, he supposed, going down to New York in the next days to see his mother and to tell her his news; but when he came back Philip must come up to Wickford to lunch, where his father would, he knew, be so glad to welcome him.

Philip could only demur helplessly; he was, he said, puzzled by the changes in the railway time and he always caught a cold in the train. But as he listened to these vague attempts at appreciation, what had struck Devon was Olive. They had just finished dining, and she had suddenly dropped her fruit knife to her plate with an impatience as sharp as the ring

ASCENT

of the metal as it fell. She broke off Philip's wandering phrases and rose; and as Devon followed her to the door, she turned to him with a tinge in her voice which seemed to reduce his attempts to futility. "I suppose you will insist on being kind to father!" He had felt her raillery extend for an instant to him. "But don't lower the action of your taste by liking him!"

The pressure of thoughts which the evening had brought him seemed to Devon to simplify itself in a central theme when, towards eleven o'clock, they stood together for a moment on the verandah, before he got into his car. She had followed him out and in the dark, with her swift unexpectedness, she had slipped her hand through his arm. The rarity, as he divined, of such signs in her made the gesture rarely valuable. As he closed his hand over hers he seemed to enter some stronghold of her thought; and he had suddenly bent his face to hers, in the obscurity.

She raised her hand hurriedly to her cheek, as his lips left it, and he could make out through the dim light the altered expression of her eyes.

He smiled at her surprise; didn't it strike her, he asked, that when he said he cared for her, he meant it?

"Yes, I suppose so; you see"—she hesitated—"I've never thought much about those things. No, it's strange; but really I've never thought about them." She was silent for an instant. "And you won't think that I'm nothing but what I seem?"

Devon had not answered her at once. He had looked up at the starless sky which, beyond the scattered lights and the soft stillness of the village, hung above them. The air was saturated with the cold freshness

ASCENT

of May and with the mystery of imprecision; and as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he could trace the bare trees, stretching long fine fingers to the blue of the night like delicate antennæ of perception.

“I shall always be a little shocked, I think, at the only things you understand in me . . . !”

He had broken off his phrase; but as he turned back to her he had for the first time felt, through the obscurity, that her eyes searched his face and tried to follow his thoughts.

VIII

HE had always thought it an amazing scene, one less of brilliancy than of dexterities of arrangement; but as he slipped into a box, with the rest of the house in darkness and an act of the opera in play, Devon had never more keenly felt, in his idle way, the latent uncertainty of this New York life; that all its current left no bed rich enough to form a past, and that its lack of any form and standard had divested it of all the chances of fostering personal history.

The months, which had now run to almost a year, since he had stood by Olive for the seconds on the little porch at Ware and felt the flow of his life bend and turn to a change, had been punctuated by a perpetual series of events; events all deriving if not in action at least in consequence from that night and from the consciousness of the implication of all his feeling in its issues. He had always lacked the instinct to associate and dissociate his acts and to trace them back to their concurrent commencements; but with his married life and his complete absorption in it, he was aware that he had Olive's processes to trace, Olive as a test and Olive as a conclusion; and the impulse to order his thoughts had crept into the creation of his feeling for her.

Their marriage had been preceded, in the two or three weeks of hurried preparation, by his difficulties with his father's view of it no less than with his

ASCENT

mother's; difficulties which he was entirely prepared to regard as futile and unreasonable, but which nevertheless seemed to him symbolic of the laws, which had never failed to operate, of the failure of his natural expectancies of sympathy. His mother's objections had been the more phrased, and therefore the less unmanageable, of the two. It was nonsense—her mind could not rise beyond this—that with all of his world to choose from, with his rising talent and his certainty of a large income, he should marry a provincial girl from heaven knew where. The word provincial enclosed the kernel of her disapproval, and she repeated it, in Devon's view, not to satiety but to the point of insanity. As she grew older, it frequently struck him that experience came to her only as a constant depletion, as the perpetual immaturity of her face increased in direct ratio to her years. She had ended by saying that she would resign herself to it, since she evidently must; that from her photograph Olive evidently knew how to wear her clothes, that she would not come to the wedding but that she would send a little rope of pearls, and finally that he too closely resembled his father to make any explanation of his course easily definable.

Devon himself had never again spoken as fully as in their first brief exchange. But he had tacitly asked, by his implications and allusions, if his son could suppose it agreeable to see him charted for a worse failure than his own; "and it will be a failure—mind!" he had brought out on the single occasion when his comment was direct. "Worse than mine because it will be less of an inevitability and more of a mess. You'll understand—the only thing to do with your mother was

to get rid of her. I had to let her make me into a persecutor or a cross or something like that, before she'd even relax her grip. She's always had in mind, you know, a mythical woman about whom I lost my head—a low creature, a siren. Well, I let her think it; if she'd known it was the jades on which I spent my income and silence that I wanted to live with, she'd never have let me go. But with you it will be different. That girl's got a will—more than a will, an obsession."

"You must remember that she's very young, and that she's all hunger;" Devon had tried to put it lightly.

"Greed's the word for her;" his father's terseness was marked. "She's all greed. She's got more greed than she's got soul." He had then wandered easily off into the question of what soul was, apart from the soul he felt to be in his stones—if it weren't always a crystallisation of implicit and perfect beauty, and if human beings hadn't ruined it, with their noxious attempts at reform and elaboration. He could do these things divertingly; but his son did not lose the point he had meant to make. The fact that he did not define it left none the less apparent his pride and his disappointment. Devon didn't quite know what his father had hoped—probably that he should go on from success to success in architecture and that his human relations should be confined to a misanthropic scepticism. This ignorance, in its pathos and its absurdity, laid another deterrent hand on his shoulder; a hand which never for a moment touched his confidence, but which increased, to a point at which he had never before realised it, his inherent sense of isolation.

Just how deep the roots of his resolution had struck

ASCENT

was progressively apparent to him when he faced again his usual world of contacts, with all of them changed by the change in him. The loose years behind him drifted out of sight with little to mark, in his memory, what their passage had been. All his vague potentialities had been caught up in a hand of purpose which gave them a sudden form and force. What he had wanted, he saw, had been more than an incentive; he had needed a stimulant. The magic interplay of response penetrated, for the first time, to the fastnesses of his inarticulacy; and he began to understand that Olive had touched his life at that unique and central point which meant a surrender of all his resistances to surrender and a dedication of the mind itself to change.

Their first weeks and months had led them step by step through all the surprises of a new existence. Devon was too sensitive to take each of its stages as anything less than it was, and each new happiness and each added intimacy came to him with the freshness of discovery. He had scarcely admitted to himself that the time was so astonishing to them both—to the long stricture of his reticence as well as to her inexperience—that it could not measure itself against any usual scale. They had passed the summer at a camp of his father's in the mountains, and the days remained suffused for Devon in the haze of his earliest feeling for her. Each slant of her smile had meant, to his expectancy, not only what he had but what the future would bring him of her. It had not been until the autumn, when he saw her confronted by the exact facts of their future, that he had caught himself wondering whether her gaiety and softness were

ASCENT

so much real in themselves as inevitable responses. As their days began to assume the first outlines of habit, he saw with how firm a hand she manipulated his feeling. He wondered—the thought reverted to him now, as he caught, across the house, the glimpse for which he had been watching of her dark head, held at so fine an angle above the dead white of her velvet dress—if all women were as much more simple than men in such a relation. He was perpetually restricted by the numberless complexities of his consideration; while she, with a complete directness, held him inevitably where she wanted him. In their closest moments she escaped him; and he had never faced the fact as to whether it were a refusal of her feeling, or whether the imagination of his own would not always leave her below that place to which he had attained in his response to her.

Devon had always been amused by the definiteness of purpose in the women of his country and their quickness in the discovery of means to fulfil it; but Olive's definiteness none the less astonished him. He had the odd sense that once she began to put her wishes into practical execution, she was completely on her own ground. She knew not only exactly how they must live and exactly what house would be most appropriate for them; she also wanted the finer manifestations. If she spent days in the sheer pleasure, as she told him, of the shops and of being able to buy things, she had too the surest discrimination between what she did and didn't want. She would go from an upholsterer's, where they were choosing silks, or turn from the selection of the sable muff he had planned for her Christmas present, to slip off to the museum for an hour amongst

ASCENT

the prints; and he understood that the quick discernment she had inherited from her grandfather would always give her an ultimate independence of action. Her power of absorption was at once apparent as no less deep than both her perfect practicality and the swift intelligence of her taste. He saw at each point her eagerness to educate in herself a finer perception; yet he had the pervasive notion, behind the pleasure with which his thoughts followed her, that what she lacked, in spite of her rapid capacity, was the recognition of any standard which would ever satisfy her.

The qualities she would manifest in her impact with people were made evident to him in what he felt to be the perfectly composed comedy of her relations with his mother. He never watched them together without seeing Mrs. Devon fall into the same position on the edge of her chair, with her small jeweled fingers folded, her pale blue eyes wide and her elaborate white head at an angle of mute astonishment. He had not followed the stages of their intercourse, but he guessed that it had begun with his mother's haunting fear of Olive's solecisms and ended with her equal fear of her own. Olive dated and placed her. She was everything affable and charming to her mother-in-law; but she too evidently gave Mrs. Devon, for the first time in the unbroken security of her existence, a sense of her ignorances. Her relegations ran from Mrs. Devon's comments on a person, a book or a situation—which she could with a glance reduce to their elemental fragility—to her acceptance of a form or her espousal of a fashion. New York, and with it all that had made Mrs. Devon's world compact and complete, was after all, as she reminded her, only representative of

ASCENT

one place, and as such narrow; had it never occurred to Mrs. Devon that the views of life in any given community, whether it were New York or Ware, were necessarily local? She herself wanted a wider range—she wanted the world. Mrs. Devon, if she could not follow her, was none the less helpless before such an extension of scale; and all she could condense it to, Devon saw, with a sense of the unutterable ironies of progression, was a sudden conviction that she had been ordering her shoes at a wrong shop or miscalculated the angle of a hat.

He had only to shift his eyes to her, across the darkened house, from where he sat in his mother's box, to renew his sense of the perfection with which she had slipped into the conditions of her new existence. To watch her without interruption, in the anonimity of interest necessary in a public place, with the sense of his possessorship of her more intimate and the sense of her inaccessibility more acute, gave his vision of her a sudden different angle. He found himself smiling, in the obscurity, at his recurrent notion that she was the embodiment of the first stage of sophistication of her country. The excess and vulgarity of most of the women around her were the last signs of its youth. They showed what had formed both the American weakness and the American astuteness, the great American collections and the American ignorance, and the relapse into sordidness of the original American sense of adventure. He felt as if all these forces had passed into her ambition of ideas, and had become, in her, a personal exemplification.

She had separated herself from her surroundings in the brilliancy of the house; but when he joined her

ASCENT

in the lobby—he had arranged to meet her and take her home, after a meeting which had delayed him for the early evening—Devon thought that her trick of the accentuation of her personality was even more finely turned. She had left her hostess, and as she stood alone, with her furs drawn around her and her eyes on the long procession of motors outside, her impenetrable quality and her ease in isolation were such, he reflected, as few women ever captured.

Her face changed quickly as she saw him. She followed him out to the waiting car, and when she was settled in her corner she was full of her usual rapid questions. How had he enjoyed the evening, and how had he liked her dress; and his mother—was she still too scandalised because they were doing the drawing-room walls in a lustreless white rather than in silk?

“It’s too incredible to her, but she mayn’t mind when it strikes her as my economy. Isn’t it absurd how easily a thing is forgiven if it has a moral sound? Of course I’m glad if it costs you less; but then if I happened to prefer old brocade—why, I’m afraid I should quite simply have it!”

She laughed; they had just drawn up at their door, and he paused for a second in the lit hallway while she turned back from the lowest stair to look down at him.

“Every time anyone is too uncertain about me, I drop a hint that your library was the first room I arranged. It’s astonishing how such sentimentalities hold people! The human thing is the most dangerous and delicate in the world, and yet the moment you seem to deal in it they feel reassured! They think all

our future is safe because I myself sorted your books; as if I should have done it if I hadn't preferred to! But you were right about the Forain, John; it will be delightful over my white mantel. . . . Come, I'll show you!"

She moved up the stairs ahead of him with a long trail of her dress, as she gradually rose, drawing a line of glimmering white in the low light, and she opened, on the next landing, the door of the little room which was particularly her own. Her pleasure in it had had an extravagance which, in Devon's view, was often reminiscent of her detestation of the little frame house in Ware. The room was white—white, as she had said, being the only thing possible for a person as thin and dark as she—and he had brought colour to it by every little object he had been able to pick up for her. It was still full of the disarrangement of their unsettled state, with a long strip of velvet which they were considering stretched over the chairs and with her books strewn across the desk; but he never saw her move from the light of the white azaleas in the window to the light of the fire, without evoking the contrast which had made so much of the poignancy of her youth.

He laid his hand abruptly on her arm, as she paused before the mantel where the engraving stood.

"Do you understand what it means that—wonderful as you are—I've been able to give you anything?" he said, with his words as sudden as his touch.

He was close enough to see her eyebrows tremble for a second, before they rose in their accustomed motion. "No, you're wrong; it's everything that you've given me."

ASCENT

Devon smiled. "Don't limit it by saying it's everything—that it's all accomplished!"

She seemed to put this aside. "And don't you call it everything that you've been so angelic to me, that you've brought me to an air I could breathe, that you've given me all that, what I admit, is my rather exacting fancy, lit upon—everything, the old harp downstairs, this room, the lovely Chinese Chippendale, and just to-day the little first edition of Poe there, which grandfather always so longed for?" She shook her head, with her smile still on him. "That's the difference between us; you see infinity in something which is to me just—well, just a stage of infinity."

Devon's hand tightened on her arm. "Don't, my dear, apply your criticism to what's rather beyond criticism!"

She caught him up. "But surely you never thought that I was going to be satisfied for the rest of my life, just because your mother asked people to lunch every day to meet me and because you gave me a band of diamonds for my hair!" She glanced in the mirror over the mantel and loosened the knot of her hair under the jewels.

Devon was silent; the streak in her of which he was ceaselessly aware, but which in the passage of the last months had so rarely come to light, had seemed in the drift of their few words to flash suddenly into view, like the steely line of a river in a wide landscape.

"If I had just ambition, like most of these women I see—! How simple ambition after all is! Your mother's delightful to me, and so is everyone else. There's nothing that isn't delightful—music, pictures, hundreds of things. If I wanted to refuse to dine out

every night, I suppose I could; if I wanted to see and hear everything that's newest, or if I wanted what's called a motive or an inspiration or a cause—all those things would be easy enough. But curiosity, you see, is so different from ambition!"

Devon was still silent. The word seemed to him to express all the penetrative processes of her education. His reversion of thought to her childhood always touched his tenderness, and he dropped the cigarette he held and laid his free hand on her other arm. "Ah, Olive, you're so magnificent and living's so brutal . . ."

"Nothing's brutal if you refuse to let it be brutal. What I want is the whole thing, all,"—she drew a deepened breath, as if the current of her idea ran through her; "oh, even the misery of it. I want the little things, and I want the world. Nothing could be either too small or too large for me. You see they're rather immense terms! But they're mine. When I say you've given me everything," her gesture took in the room, "I mean that for this stage you've literally given me all I needed, every privilege and chance. You understand, don't you?"

She had turned to him a glance of appeal, and he saw it stiffen as it met what he was conscious must be the sudden difference in his own face. He still held her before him.

"Yes; but do you?"

"Do I? Haven't I always understood—grandfather used to say, too much?"

He seemed for a moment to confront the rush of her confidence, and his eyes held her for an instant like his grasp. "My dear, you're face to face with the

ASCENT

greatest emotion living can give, yet you don't see it!" He shook his head. "Your ultimate everything—even yours—will always come back to what one person can make you feel and what you can make one person feel. That's"—his shoulders rose—"oh, that's what's called the miracle of existence."

"But the personal isn't all of experience!" Her voice had its quick impatience as she broke in.

"What you're after, my dear, isn't experience but experiences! You don't see—I suppose you're too young and too lovely to—that everything's quantitative unless it's really lived. If you don't recognise that, all your famous curiosity will go to the dogs!" His face had changed again to its usual quiescence, and he dropped his hands from her arms to take another cigarette from the box on the mantel. "So don't deny the personal. It's rather wonderful, you know, the personal; or rather you don't know, yet, anything about it! Come, it's really too late for you! Yes, it was just right, wasn't it?—that line of light for your hair! I hesitated so long about whether the diamonds ought to have a clear edge or a broken one, against it. Oh, and by the way—" he put his hand into his coat, "I've something for you."

Olive stretched out her hand. Her head was still bent over the fire and her thoughts still evidently moving in the tone of their talk. "For me?"

"Yes; open the box, and you'll see."

He drew out for her, as she raised the little lid, a long coil of gold which dropped, as he lifted it, into the lines of a rosary. "It's old Spanish—you see? Isn't it extraordinary? If you knew who's sent it to you, you'd know why! This afternoon I had a telephone

ASCENT

message from Ames—Robert Ames, the priest, you know.”

Olive was drawing the beads through her fingers, with a frown of concentration. “I don’t understand . . .”

“Oh, you must have heard me speak of him! When I went up to Oxford for a year he happened to be there—just through Stonyhurst, and giving a course on Moral Philosophy. Of course he was already well known, already booked to be what he is, and I was only an unattached young American. But somehow we struck up a real intimacy, as men do those things.”

“And he’s here?” She hesitated. “Didn’t I see in the papers . . .”

“Yes, he landed yesterday, for his course of lectures here; and he rang me up to-day, from the Archbishop’s where he’s staying until he can get his own quarters, to say I must stop in to-night, if my meeting broke up in time, just to have a word with him and to take you a belated wedding present. I was able to see him for only a second—even then there were other people waiting for him; but he was just the same Ames . . . Oh, they’re an amazing lot, that family; as amazing as a thing like this!” He motioned to the rosary. “It’s a tradition as tightly woven as anything in the world. They’ve been the Catholics of Catholics since the eleventh century, or some such appalling time. When I’ve stayed with them, in the country, it’s seemed quite natural to hear them pray every day for the conversion of England. His brother, you know, is Archbishop of Stoke; but it’s Robert, of course, who is the wonder . . .”

ASCENT

He laid his hand over hers, and touched the beads through her fingers.

"Just look at the work on each bead; and the strength and fineness of the links—! One gets some faint idea of what it means to them—to Catholics; oh, it's more than that—of what it means to us all. A thing like this somehow stands for all growth, for all increased fineness, for all capacity to believe." His fingers closed closely on hers for a second. "That's, my dear, what you need!"

"An Ames?" Her eyes were again ironic.

"A rosary!" His retort was as rapid as her own, and it ended in his smile. "Ah yes, you must see Ames. He's too busy, he says, to come to us; but he wants you to go to him, the first day he can rescue an hour . . ."

IX

OLIVE had left the house a little past four, on the March afternoon whose greyness was full of the recent snows. She stood for a moment on the doorstep, looking up and down the irregular line of the architecture of the long street, with its pseudo-French façades still interspersed with the earlier brown stone. The interest with which she had first seen it was still uppermost in her mind. Even the noises of the passing traffic and the closed security of the narrow marble houses like her own had excited her imagination. Each detail in her installation had not been a burden and an irritant, as Mrs. Devon had pessimistically predicted, but something to linger over with pleasure. She remembered that she had passed a long afternoon in the choice of her window curtains, and she already knew just how the pink geraniums in her window boxes were to be planted, in the coming spring. It had been an interest each time her car stood at the curb, to take her through the moving flow of the city, and she had felt her vitality made more tonic by the effervescent life in the faces which passed her, as if she at last held and fingered the brilliant fabric which was woven not out of the anticipations she had kept in check but of actuality.

She wondered if it were perhaps the nature of her errand which marked for her the subsidence of these first impressions; but for the first time the street, as

ASCENT

she turned out of the entrance, seemed to be differently peopled and her steps bent toward a definite arrival. She had opened Father Ames's note, that morning, with the sense that it contained the promise of some revelation of personality definitely new to her. It was typed by the young priest who was with him as his secretary. But it bore his signature, and she had at once felt, in the rapidly formed, pointed letters, as she said with a smile to Devon, the illusion which surrounds the people whose authority is beyond question. Father Ames had written that, after a delay of two weeks, which his constant engagements had necessitated, he would be glad to see them that afternoon, and she had arranged to meet Devon at the house where he had some temporary rooms.

The address which had been given her was in one of the west streets beyond the park, and in the neighbourhood of the Paulist church. The paths across the park were still slippery and deserted; but the hour had so particular a charm for her, with the electric brilliancy of the signs on the buildings flashing into the sunset, that she was glad she had determined to walk. Yet as she looked over the vast stretch of irregular roofs, she felt the direction of the tide of her thoughts sway and change. Her critical sense detached itself, for the first time, from the effects of the heady stimulant of the friction and competition of the existence she had been living. She told herself, suddenly, that New York had presented splendid facts to her, but had not extracted them from her. The quality of a human enrichment had after all been completely absent. Her dissection was too clear not to admit that this lack of any reflective element had

appealed to her. But she knew too that the luxury and the opportunity, the stir of appreciation about her and the first lift of her wings after the constrictions of Ware, had touched only the outer surfaces of her mind. Even the brief sketch in her thoughts of what the conditions of a life like Father Ames's must be had stirred her deeper curiosities. The books she had read with Mr. Lacy and bits of his talk and his tradition drifted, after weeks of disappearance, through her memory. As she paused at the outer edge of the park, with her eyes travelling beyond the trees, whose branches had already the first misty grey of spring, to the early lights in the serried wall of the houses to the south, she felt that the foreground of her interest had been altered and displaced; that the life she had been leading had had none of the shadows which compel one to realise substance, and the people about her none of the impalpabilities of educated personalities, but only inexactnesses.

After she had left the park, her impending sense of expectation in her errand was heightened by the difference in the streets. It took her only a few minutes to pass first into a more dubious and then into a poorer quarter. Even in the lingering cold, the children from the flat houses were clustered noisily about the doorsteps and screamed from the alley-ways. The house before which she stopped was one of the dingiest, and she hesitated, with a sense of incredulity, when the janitress who watched her from the basement told her this was her destination. Father Ames had sublet Father Croft's rooms on the top floor, she said, and visitors had only to push the bell of the uppermost flat and go up.

ASCENT

The door, which opened automatically, admitted her to stairs which were almost completely dark and she made her way slowly, with her surprise increasing at each step. Her instinctive effort to gratify the outward element in life left her astonished by this barren discomfort. It was the last surrounding in which she would have expected Ames to be, from the constant accounts of his activities in the daily papers. As she mounted the last flight, a woman pushed past her, on her way down. Her dress was ornate and shabby and heavy with perfume, and her face reddened and sullen. She was the most unlikely type of person to consult a priest of Father Ames's type; and some dim sense of the dramatic element in the contradiction of such circumstances drew Olive's wonder after her, as she descended, and sharpened the curiosity with which she stopped on the last landing.

The door of the flat stood ajar, and after a momentary uncertainty she pushed it open and made her way across the narrow entry which immediately confronted her. As she paused on the threshold of the front room, an exclamation of surprise broke from her. The room, which was long and low and lit from the south, lifted her instantly to a different world. She imagined that in itself it was bare and plain enough to match the rest of the house; but her single glance at it was enough to show her what it held. A long strip of dim tapestry—a faded sixteenth century Adoration, with a charming naïveté of execution—was stretched across the shabby wall. The mantel was crowned by a slim young St. Stephen, of the same period, with pointed flames about his raised head, and the triptych of which his figure formed the centre was heavy with gold. There was

a carved Virgin and Child, on a French Renaissance pillar, at whose base a bowl of the first jonquils had been placed; and over the littered desk hung an enamel of some saint, with a lovely inlay of blue. The tables, amongst their piled papers, held piles of books, with every now and then a little ornament. A tiny ivory St. Catherine trod with exaltation on the dragon beneath her, and the brown of the missal which lay beside her was so old that it seemed to Olive like the richest earth touched with sun. Yet the cross which stood on the desk—her sense of contradiction returned as her eyes lit on it, below the brilliancy of the enamel,—was of the plainest wood. Its presence laid a baffling hand on her, as she turned, at the sound of a step in the doorway, to face Father Ames.

He came forward immediately, with a cordial assurance. Her instant impression of him was that he was tall and thin, with markedly dark hair and eyes, and that his smile ran over his face like a light.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Devon, to receive you like this! You found the door open, I hope? You see, we've no servant here in the afternoon, and there's no other way to manage. I was finishing up some instructions to Father Meryon, in his room, and all afternoon I've been trying to give the fathers at the church a little help with their penitents. . . . They're so endlessly kind to me! And John? He's to join us? But come . . . you must sit down!"

Olive had been conscious of the way his rapid tone held her; but as he ended she felt all the vividness of the power which chained her attention. She had no analogies for it, in either her experience or her imagination; and she was only aware, at the moment,

ASCENT

that in the face of so trained a force her own capacity seemed suddenly dissolved into the accidental and fortuitous.

She murmured that John had agreed to join her, and she followed him to the little fire in the grate. Father Ames paused for a second at his desk, to replace a paper and to throw down a sheaf of telegrams, and then drew a chair opposite hers.

"Of course I've seen John—he's perhaps told you? If I have time for sleep and food, I've time for John; I don't willingly do without him! One night we had just a few words; but I was off to Pittsburgh at midnight, and we'd a chance only to realise all we wanted to say; and then, of course, my great desire was to see you . . ." his eyes played on her.

"It was no more than mine to see you," she returned his smile; "and to judge for myself how such an incredible thing as a friendship could come to exist between you."

Father Ames laughed. "You must go, I fear, a long journey; not far back into my capacity—for mine's a poor thing—but to that strange mixture of tenderness and determination which makes up your husband. I always tell him he's one of the few modern men—of course one knows some mediæval ones—who's got the real love of the unseen, of the thing felt and not defined. If he'd defined it, he'd have had a religion; as it is—" His gesture ended the phrase; she had a sense that even the motions of his hands had point and intention, as if they matched the incisiveness of his briefest phrase, and as if all of him had been composed to penetrate every obscurity and impress every surface. "Now tell me! You've been married almost a year,

ASCENT

haven't you? And had you known John long—was it a long attachment?"

Olive felt herself stiffen instinctively against the light note of authority which underlay his ease.

"I had known him always, ever since I was the littlest child; but as to the length of our attachment . . ."

He took up her hesitation instantly. "It is really measured, then, by the length of time you knew him; that's clear enough! No one could know John without feeling him. You've a great opportunity before you—granting his nature, and with his evident devotion for you;" his smile deepened; "and an opportunity is all that a woman who is young and intelligent can ask."

She felt again the rapid touch of the impersonality in his personalities. It held her for the pause of a moment, and then she shook her head. "I'm afraid I should call it a necessity and not an opportunity. I see very little of the stimulant of glory in what is—for some reason I can't define—not one's privilege but one's routine. I am not, you see, a Catholic; and what you call faith, I call a capacity for illusion. You must forgive me; I was brought up by an atheistic old grandfather."

Father Ames fell back in his chair, pressing together the tips of his fingers, which, it struck her, had the length and the pallor of the hands in the portraits of the old ecclesiastics.

"At least, then, you've faith in your own lack of illusion. It's not—may I say it?—an uncommon disease!"

"No," said Olive; her shoulders rose and fell lightly. "But I have it uncommonly. I was taught to believe

ASCENT

in something wider than the personalities of Christianity."

"God is not a person, God is a force. . . ." he smiled again as he paused. "But of course the mysteries of revelation would not touch a person with your training. Again and again I commit the error of expecting the Holy Ghost to work faster than He does. It is not for us to hurry you, Mrs. Devon;" he laughed; "living is full of contradictions, and those contradictions, as you will find, are explained only by the inexplicable."

Olive let her slower smile answer his. "No contradictions of my heresy could be stranger than the contradictions of your faith; than the contradiction, for instance"—she glanced about her—"between this room and the woman I met on the stairs!"

"The woman—? Yes, of course! She was looking for Father Croft, and since he has been called down to the University at Washington, Father Meryon and I see everyone who comes here for him. He's one of the young priests over at the Paulists—a most holy man; and anything I can do to give him a hand—he, who is doing work of the soul when my work is far too much of the brain . . ." His eyes narrowed for an instant on her. "It puzzles you, I suppose—discipline?"

"It scarcely so much puzzles me as it seems to me futile. To couple your little St. Catherine there with the needs and emotions of such a creature . . ." she broke off.

Father Ames shot a look around them. "My things here . . . I see! They are most of them from our chapel at home, you know, and they go wherever I can

ASCENT

take them with me; sometimes in the desert or on the other side of the world, they've been the only sense of a chapel that I had! But don't you understand," his glance turned back to her, "that it's only because of their connection with such a woman—or with every soul—that they've any value whatever, that they exist at all?"

Olive was suddenly silent. Her rapid perception was fastening on each detail of her extraordinary impression of his direction, the conquest of human relations which it implied and the play of experience. Yet what principally held her was her knowledge that it was inaccessible to her; that for the first time she had touched a world where her own weapons and premises were inadequate. All the aggressive element in her impact with people rose, and hardened the corners of her lips into a set line. She bent forward a little, with her furs falling back, and dropped her eyes from Father Ames's.

"I quite see what you mean;" her voice was as clear but lower. "To exist at all for you—and even for such people as she, if once they believe—beauty must be linked with God. There's nothing—is there?—like the caste of belief—no laws so rigid and so exclusive! But don't forget that for some of the rest of us, these things and this room may have their own meaning, and that if your Virgin there isn't a saint to us, at least she's a symbol . . . and of something you can't understand!"

She felt instinctively the suddenly closer mesh in the chain of his attention. His scrutiny seemed to her to have all the training of the confessional and of a habit of the balance of human quantities. He did not

ASCENT

question her, as if he had long since recognised the dispersement of thought which comes with the too facile phrase; but his attention pressed her to continue.

"I, who have merely touched your room"—she made a rapid gesture—"already it has made me feel freer. I've felt in it the promise of the things I've been searching for this long time; nothing like faith, no! My disbelief has its own commandments, and more than ten of them! But I've felt the enrichment of living, the inner quality which makes experience valuable, the seen and the unseen; all of the things without which this existence, here about us, is so intolerable. . . ."

Father Ames considered her for a moment. "And you're not satisfied with what your life's giving you? But you must command everything, Mrs. Devon! And New York's a marvellous place in which to command everything!"

Olive frowned. "Don't misunderstand me. Of course I've enjoyed being here, of course it's intoxicated and thrilled me. I came, perhaps you know, from a little village, where I'd had nothing but my imagination to live on. I'm worthy of no sort of sympathy; I've gone in for it all—for its restlessness and its splendour—as thoroughly as my mother-in-law; and you know my mother-in-law? But—I don't know how to put it to you"—she laid her hand on her breast—"I've not been content."

He seemed easily to disregard the personal comment she had made for the larger one.

"It's an amazing life"—he hesitated. "And most of it is sincere. New York is always a lesson to me. Its noble people, its fabulous generosity, its fever of pleasure—and its lack of consistency. It's the image

ASCENT

of what is in us all, of our readiness to have and to deal, our acceptance of the outer aspect, our fear of the quiet that is in ourselves. We're after all, each one of us, as inconsistent, in our way!"

"That's a danger which can't confront you, Father!" Her retort had a sharpened edge. "Even the contradictions in your room can be explained, I suppose, if one applies a creed to them!"

"Ah, you're beginning to see, then, that the application, as you call it, of a creed explains everything!" Father Ames's smile still held. "You're beginning to admit the fact that God, for His inscrutable reasons, deals both in the little Catherine there and the woman you passed on the stairs! No, no!" He drew his hand across his eyes. "My consistency is nothing—as weak as all human consistency; but God's is His own."

She measured his silence silently for a moment. "Then even yours has its lapses?" Her gesture interrupted the sudden movement with which he raised his hand to interpose. "No, don't deny or affirm it! I see that it has, and that that's why it's a help to one to be here. More, I see that's the reason why, the instant that I came in, I had a sense of escape—and of something deeper—of explanation."

"The opposite to what one is doing always seems an escape; and I doubt"—his lightness was glancing—"if you are really searching for explanations!"

"The explanation which your room has been to me is purely personal, and I have no right to trouble you with it." She had stiffened in her chair, with an accent of reserve; then her hands flew out, with a sudden movement of appeal and she again bent forward. "But don't

ASCENT

you see, Father, that it brings one to the human soul, your room? Oh, not only to yours, but even to mine? We've all got our ugly shells; we've all got our beauties—not, I admit"—she looked up at the Virgin above her—"as definite and as exquisite as yours; still they exist! And we've all got," her finger pointed to the cross on the table, "to be stripped at the end. That's why it makes me feel dumb; because I—I, whom you wouldn't know if you passed me in the street to-morrow,—see here something which I haven't seen before, and which I don't want to admit. . . ."

She had dropped back, with her hands fallen to her lap. Her eyes, in their fixity on Father Ames's face, searched for his response. In the last instants she had definitely measured the closer approach to her of his concentration and that with each word she pronounced he had more clearly seen her as she could fancy she presented herself—with the low lamp beside her casting a shadow rather than a light on her and her outline, from her soft dark hat to her feet, drawn in black against the blues and creams of the tapestry behind her. The sense of feeling her way through avenues more tortuous and reserves more initial than any she had ever imagined was vividly present to her. All her prehensiveness had turned to the weapons she could use to drive home that personal insistence which she instinctively regarded as the single issue at stake.

She could have told the precise instant when Father Ames's mood assured itself.

"I am glad if it is of the smallest service to you to see these things," he said easily. "But do not let your evident talent for exaltation lead you into credences which you do not really possess."

ASCENT

"That I don't possess—?" Her voice faltered.

"I mean what one must always mean in dealing with a woman who has no rule of belief, and consequently no law of sacrifice to consider. It's my duty, as a priest, to remind you that where one of my own children is trained in the way she can take help from me, you are not; and that it would be unjust to you to offer you a solace which you might afterwards regret having asked. I've had confessions enough from non-Catholics, in my time, but they've always seemed to me tragic things; indeed, what else could they be, with no faith behind them and no absolution to attain—?"

"Then, Father,"—her tone was keener—"you shut people like me out?"

Father Ames's hand lifted. "Ah, never, my dear lady! You shut yourselves out! Don't give such a cruel name, either," his voice changed to a warmer graciousness, "to what I hope—more than ever, since I've seen you—will be a real friendship between us."

She shook her head. "What an absurdity! As if, with our differences, we could ever have a friendship!"

"Ah, I admit," Father Ames had the quickest deprecation, "that all the space in the world lies between us!"

She gave him a long, clear look; her smile was touched, for a second, with the lightest shadow of old Lacy's; then, turning with an evident effort to the table at her elbow, she took up the only photograph, a small framed snapshot, which the room contained. Her question had a conscious accent of banality as she spoke again.

"What a charming group—the black habits of the nuns against that old wall! And the lady with them and the man beside her . . . it's all in the picture—"

ASCENT

Father Ames followed her tone instantly. "Yes, it has charm, hasn't it? That was taken at Trant, in Wiltshire—you've heard of Trant?—one day when the nuns drove over from Trowbridge, to the chapel, for Benediction. The lady with them—Lady Isabel Bourdas—and her brother Terence are two of my oldest friends. We grew up together, and we hope to grow old together. You may perhaps have met her, when her father—the old Duke—was Governor General, in Canada? No? She is a devoted friend of my sister, who is one of the nuns in the group. My sister is known in religion as Sister Martha of the Cross . . ."

His words broke off. Olive had risen, with one of her sudden motions, and drawn from her muff a long shining object. She took a step forward, to the figure of the little Virgin on the pillar beside him, and with a rapid gesture she flung about the shoulders of the statue the rosary he had sent her. As she drew back and turned to him, her voice was more hurried and insecure than he had yet heard it.

"I hope you don't mind. . . . But since I've seen you, I can't keep it; no, I can't! It's full of all I'll never have, all I've been taught against, all that condemns a rootless creature like me. Thank you, Father . . . it was most good of you, and it's so beautiful; but I'd rather not. . . ." She turned again, this time to the door. "Ah, and here's John. . . ."

X

OLIVE found herself increasingly desirous to be alone, as the next days passed; yet she quite realised that the close sequence of her engagements, with all the variation of contact they brought with them, lent a more dramatic savour to the obscurities in her mind. She had been suddenly furnished with the contrast of inner comparisons. To come in from seeing pictures with Mrs. Devon or from the crowds at a concert, to fling herself into a chair beside her fire, without ringing for lights or for tea, and to let the coals fall slowly to ashes in the grate and the room turn dark and cold, was to return as suddenly to her private thoughts. The stir of her questioning came to her daily more insistently; she caught it across the press of the streets and through the conversation about her; and it enriched and warmed her quality so palpably that she had a touch of abstraction in her brilliancy and her luminance was softened by her evident sense of the inexplicable.

The echoes which Father Ames had aroused in her went back, as she realised, beyond her own memory. Her chief wonder, as she searched for some tracery in these currents and counter-currents, was how she had come to be equipped with definitions so absolute in their superficiality. She could imagine no phrase more alien to her instinct than any which dealt with an inner world. It was consequent to this, she supposed, as well as to all the suppressions of poverty, that her sense of life had been quantitative and that the adventure of

ASCENT

experience had been to her an objective one. With the touch of new forces in her thoughts and the sense of a new balance in her relations, such a view seemed to her extraordinary in its puerility. She had an intrinsic belief that she ought to feel herself lifted and freed by this widened vision; but she instinctively applied it in her personal ways, and this sudden extension of scale seemed to her real because it offered so vast a field for the play of the insistencies of her will and the intricacies of her ambition.

The discovery lent a deeper and deeper tone to her reflections. She supposed—with the sardonic twist of comment which at times so leapt out in her—that the fact that she had never been more careful of her beauty and her dress was her first approach to a ritual, in her initiation into the subtleties of introspection. All her consciousness of her personality had never been keener. She even turned a new eye back on the elements which had produced her, and there was for the first time something poignant to her in Rebecca's death and in Philip's failures. What she had regarded as the rich possibilities of her nature and the ultimacy of her powers seemed, under the recollection of Father Ames's standard, to be poor and thin. Any personal insistence, she felt, would be too fragile without such a guidance; and she never examined her thoughts without a sense of his eyes on her face and of the blend, in his voice, of authority with humility.

Devon had been surprised that she one afternoon asked him to take her that same evening to a lecture, the first which Ames was to give, on Lourdes. "I'm not astonished you should want to hear him, because even your talk with him must have been enough to show

what he is; but Lourdes—! Oh, I know that in his hands it will have not only all the swing of its emotion—the collective emotion of a crowd—but that he'll handle with the easiest touch the scientific end; all it says which science can't help out, and all it does to help science itself out. No—somehow you've not yet got—" he smiled, with his gravity softening—"the generosity of imagination for Lourdes!"

She surprised him further by nodding acquiescently. He had come in to her room to find her stretched on her sofa; she was looking beyond him to the pale sun in the window, and the white of the lace coverlet, of the lace wrap on her shoulders and of the pillow behind her, gave her eyes a deeper darkness.

"I know I've so much to see and to feel; yes, I know; but it seems too that it's from him I'll get it."

Devon laughed, as he drew out his watch. "I've exactly twenty minutes before I must leave the house; but I could spend every one of them in telling you that you'll never get anything from Ames until you're willing to get it from Catholicism; that he's all that, and it's all of him!"

She nodded again. He had seldom seen her more pliant. "But I want to go to-night, and I want you to take me. You see"—her finger traced the web of the lace across her knees—"if we saw him—afterwards—for an instant, you would arrest his attention and I shouldn't."

"Your honesty's amazing; but incredible as it may seem when one looks at you," he lifted from her forehead a heavy wave of her hair, "it's true." His voice changed. "Nothing could make me happier than to have him help you. Then to-night—?"

ASCENT

She nodded once more, with her face suffused with meditation; and after he had left her she lay motionless, comparing in her mind the dull, unretentive passage of the days as she lived them, with the reverberations of a life like Father Ames's, every action of which seemed to send its sound down all the various corridors of eventuality.

It was when she saw him on the bare stage of the hall that night, however, that she got her vividest glimpse of all the intricacies of what she felt to be his peculiar asceticism. The hall was filled to its utmost extension, a visiting Cardinal was present, and an eminent Bishop made the introduction; but as he stepped forward, with his preliminary bow to the upper box, Father Ames seemed to her to have stepped back into the tapestry of which he was, for a beat of time, only a detached figure. His hands were clasped behind him and his eyes on the ground; and his words fell with the unbroken rapidity which marked the flow of his thoughts. She had never imagined such a lightning connection between brain and expression, made with so infallible a security. Yet in his fixed motionlessness, with the beat on his lowered face of the lights and the attention of the crowd, his chief conveyance of himself seemed to her to be in his humility. He had that voluntary recognition of his place in the scale of authority which only a religious hierarchy can impose. Her thoughts flew back to the long journeys of conquest of which this arrival must be the result; of the adventures of his way, of his pitfalls and victories, and of what had put beauty into the bareness of his thought and bareness into its beauty. His history lay spread before her like a rich old

book, bound and shaped in a way to draw all her powers of imagination, yet in a language whose characters melted, under her eyes, into mystery.

She laid her hand on Devon's arm as the audience rose, and murmured that she would rather hurry out at once, without any effort to greet Father Ames. When they stood on the high windy steps, waiting for their motor, he bent towards her. "You didn't want to stay? Why?"

Olive frowned restlessly. "Because I get more out of it this way. What other reason should there be?"

"It's truer and truer," said Devon absently . . . "there's no one like him. Believe it or don't believe it; but after hearing him to-night, one can never again think of Lourdes as able to be solved by our present human apparatus. One knows that there's something, even if one only calls it a miracle. . . ."

She turned to look at him, with the clearest astonishment. "You have the most fantastic notions . . . !"

The wide surprise in her eyes, which, he could see, was a surprise of all her sequences of thought, struck Devon again on the following day. He had stopped at his house in the early afternoon, on his way to a nearby engagement, to have coffee with Olive, who had told him that she would be lunching alone; there, at the opposite end of the sofa before his library fire, he had found a person whom it took him a moment or two to place as Abby Trail. Seated with an irrefragable stolidity, with none of the grace of Olive's uprightness, she had greeted him and his surprise with a superficial awkwardness which, as he had at once divined, matched so poorly the certitude of her wide smile.

"Of course I didn't know if I'd find you home," she repeated, as if to deprecate her temerity in making the attempt. "But I thought you'd want news of your father, Olive; and somehow it didn't seem just right, if you did want it, not to give it to you."

As she ceased Devon had turned to look at his wife. He knew enough of her now to expect in her the peculiar acerbity which disagreement—and, as he thought, she was still young enough to call a lack of acquiescence disagreement—always struck to life in her, like a friction which produces sparks. But he had not for long seen her attitude as tense and her smile as sharp. The warm little brown room, with the glow of the fire so pleasantly touching his books, the rose of the flowers at Olive's elbow and the crystal of the coffee service in front of her, was suddenly replete with the recollections Abby must have brought in with her, from the wet spring day; and he imagined, with a flash of amusement, how satisfied Miss Trail must be that she had not ventured to come to lunch.

Olive, whose hands were constantly busy with the coffee tray, bent forward to hand him his cup. "Yes, you can imagine, John, how much I'm about to ask Abby—who's this second dropped on me. You won't change your mind, Abby, no? No coffee? And you can imagine. . . ."

Miss Trail interposed. "I guess Mr. Devon'll imagine just as much all I'm not about to ask you." Her friendly brown eyes appealed to him, with a tart humour. "I used to say I never knew which was harder on which—Ware on Olive or Olive on Ware. But after all, though, I guess she was the one that had the most to put up with. She was just alone, all by

herself; and Ware was made up of all the rest of us. By the way, Olive, do you know I've another nephew? Yes, Carrie's boy; he's just two weeks old. He's to be named for father, and father's just as pleased—! And Uncle Philip—he doesn't seem in such good health as he should be. I stop in when I can and see what Norah's up to; but somehow he seems changed since you left, and Norah says he doesn't relish his food . . .”

“Then we must at once run up to see him,” said Devon decisively. “We've tried to get him down, haven't we, Olive?—but you can imagine, Miss Trail, what he is to stir! I can manage a day or so off next week, I think, and we might arrange it for then.”

Olive's voice rose. “What an absurdity, John! You know very well that we've people coming to dine next week, to meet Father Ames; and what's more you know that kind of attitude won't hold, where father's concerned. Abby understands him as well as I do, and she knows too that he'd be thrown into a fit of consternation if I suddenly turned up. Probably his only peace in life has been since I left!”

Miss Trail's flush had slowly mounted; but after a quick glance at Devon, her dry smile showed again. “Well, I guess that's something you and your father'll have to settle between you. And I don't know as you ever have settled things with him; most times it's seemed to me you haven't. But somehow it doesn't grow easier to let people manage their own business in this world. I know I just go on, year in and year out, thinking how much more I know than anyone else, and I'm always wrong!”

"You're at least philanthropic," said Olive; she had finished pouring the coffee, and her cool hands had dropped to her lap. "I ought to have been prepared to have you set out to benefit father. I recollect how you set out to benefit that woman who lives at Long Hill Farm. You don't perhaps remember that we met you, one afternoon, as you were leaving there. . . ."

If Miss Trail had not rapidity, she had at least, Devon thought, an admirable sureness. After her momentary hesitation, she shook her head easily. "Goodness, no! I've not forgotten; and I guess Lizzie hasn't, either. She saw you pass, on your way up; and somehow it must have seemed to her just one of those things that—well, that remind you of the differences in life." Her slow glance turned toward Devon, as if she were no less instinctively aware of his unexpressed comprehension than of the thrust of Olive's antagonism. "I don't think I was ever sorrier for Lizzie than that day."

"Long Hill Farm as a refuge for despised sinners—the very end of the earth! It's a perfect setting! I call your putting her there a stroke of drama. And I suppose you've never failed to tell her, like the good Presbyterian—or is it Baptist?—that you are, that she deserved nothing better!"

"No!"—Abby shook her head good-humouredly—"I don't tell her that." Her eyes rejoined Olive's look, steadily. "Sometimes when I see her up there, just all alone in that lonesome house, with nothing but sky and fields and sky, it seems no use to remember anything more than that once she was just a good-hearted, silly girl, too fond of a good time. . . ."

"And what did she do," Olive's sharpness rose, "to

make her good times excessive? Tell us—it would be an interesting contribution.”

Miss Trail’s lips set. “I guess Lizzie’s good times and bad times belong just to her. If you or I were living up in that dreary place, like a dog the children have hooted out of town, it wouldn’t somehow seem just fair”—her smile returned, as she glanced about her—“to have people turn things over and pick them to pieces in a place like this.” She turned to Devon. “I did want so much to go to see a good piece at the theatre, while I was down. We get all the new lists through our Culture Club. But last night father and I tried, and I thought it was just the poorest kind of thing——”

Devon was just turning to answer her, with a sense of relief that they had reached a point safe from Olive’s unexpectedness, when the door opened and, as if to complete the element of contrast, Mrs. Devon came in. She was preceded by the stir which she always generated, and she joined them at the fire-side with the effect, as he thought, of a mob without direction or intention in its approach. She looked from Abby to Olive, with the helplessness of a bird, and the light of her pale eyes and the light of the diamond which hung at her throat gave him the sense of an equally conscious arrangement in their glitter.

She had come, she said, to see what Olive had finally decided about the ermine cape; and her talk ran on, like an indefinitely extensive glacier on whose surface one could never get an instant’s foothold, from her sympathy for colour and the tint of the hat she had last worn when she lunched on the Imperial

yacht at Kiel, to her reminiscence of a woman who, on that occasion, hadn't known enough to take off her veil. "Oh, and by the way, John, I've just had a letter from René Malary de la Rivaudière's mother, telling me about a new Revue. He told her to see if you had heard of it—that as an Ami du Louvre you'd want to watch the illustrations. Illustrations—they're wonderful nowadays, aren't they? There was an extraordinary man at the Grafton Gallery last spring—Scotch, and so clever. He did such a sweet eau-forte of the Petrucci child, when they came up from Rome to have the eldest of the little princesses presented . . . How girls are to be taught manners nowadays, without trains! Such a foolish economy of the Queen's! And I almost forgot to tell you that, speaking of economy, that Bank president whose name I can never recollect is coming in to lunch to-morrow. At one—will you make time, John? He wants to see those Persian tiles your father left in the library—you remember he said I could have them because they got on his nerves? So absurd! And so absurd for a banker to like Persian tiles! Then, Olive, you do think that snowy white would be amusing against your hair, at night——?"

It was astonishing to Devon that, in spite of his mother's furtive glances in her direction and her uncertainty as to whether she ought to place her as an anachronism or a type of cleverness, Abby should be the one who sustained the only ease possible, in the few moments more that she remained. She even smiled at Mrs. Devon a comprehension of her incomprehensible chatter, with what seemed to him a touch of gallantry. As he went down to the door with her,

he was surprised at the warmth with which he found himself thanking her for her visit.

"Well, I rather thought she ought to know." She jerked her head toward the upper room. "You see, her father's not as well as he ought to be. Oh, I guess he'll just run along forever this way; but Norah says he neglects himself, and that he doesn't take any interest in anything. He needs company; that's it. Somehow as people get older they seem to get more and more lonesome. . . ."

"It was extremely good of you to spare time to tell us, and I'll talk it over with Olive." His eyes met hers fully. "She'll be only too happy, as I'm sure you know, to do what's right for him."

Abby smiled back at him. "Why, of course I know. Just think how good she was to old Mr. Lacy; and I don't believe I'd have had the patience she had, living as she did and wanting things so different from most of us. Good-bye, Mr. Devon, and don't worry. I'll look in on Uncle Philip as often as may be, and I'll send you a word if there's anything really out of the way. . . ."

He had found his mother on the stairs as he turned to go up. Her small arresting presence, clinging to his elbow, claimed for a moment as much of his attention as he was ever able to concentrate on her. She had murmured, vaguely, that Miss Trail must be exceedingly interesting; but when she had ventured this opinion to Olive, it was evident that Olive had made some such reply as that Mrs. Devon thought so only because she had no premises in her experience by which to explain Abby. "Really, you know, John, at times Olive does rather leave one gaping. But, my dear boy, the way she carries herself . . . it's too

marvellous! Did you know that your father has bought a yacht? Yes, really! It appears he told someone he couldn't breathe at that awful place in July and that—except there—the sea was the only place he'd be safe from intrusion. So like him, isn't it? You look tired, my dear; you need a tonic——”

The only way to terminate their talk was to turn her over to her footman, on the step, and Devon had drawn a breath of relief as he closed the door. He saw, by a glance at the clock, that he was already late for his appointment; yet some sense of disquietude made him turn up the stairs again.

Olive was sitting in the same position she had held when he left the room, her back against the corner of the sofa, her hands pressed together and her eyes set on the window opposite; but the face she turned on him was like a sudden flame of resentment.

“Well, are you satisfied?” she broke out. “You who think I ought to learn, to soften—aren't those the safe sentimentalities you believe in? Are you at last convinced I can't be a charitable Christian like Abby? Oh, but she brought it all back to me—their smugness, their security! There's no use telling me what they are—I know what they are! I detest that weak kindness, that softness of judgment. I'd a thousand times rather be condemned by them than admire them——!”

Devon caught both her hands. “Very well. But you can't escape admitting they're real, Abby and Ware too—as real as you, and with things you haven't got.”

“I suppose you'd like me,” she flung at him, “to go to Long Hill Farm and sympathise with Lizzie Truslow!”

“I'd like you to be capable of it!” His pressure on

her hands held, with his habitual gesture, as if he unconsciously betrayed in this physical effort his attempt to lay a hold on her force. "Do you see nothing in kindness except that it's a concession? Do you see nothing in feeling except that it's vulnerable? Are you incapable of it? In a way, my dear, you're afraid of those people—afraid because, though you can't understand it, they're superior to you. Ames would be the first to tell you so."

He had then caught from her a repetition of her astonished look. Her anger died down, and she met his eyes with an incredulous surprise. It seemed to him to be compounded of all the things which confused her; and he had never more clearly felt her lack of any knowledge of human exchange, her instinctive combat of a benefit or a generosity, and the corrosive power of her mind.

XI

SHE had not seen Father Ames until the following week, when he fulfilled his promise to dine with them; and the first words he had spoken as he took his seat beside her, after dinner, had made her realise how instantly he could turn and direct the angle of her thoughts.

He had drawn forward the chair she had motioned him to, with his suggestion of a fundamental fatigue beneath his nervous force, and his eyes had touched her face keenly.

"Ah, this is good of you, Mrs. Devon! I wanted a word with you; but then you've talked to me, in your silences, all evening——!"

His greeting to her, on his arrival, had seemed to Olive to set the tone of their communication. He could not have been more evidently gracious, more affectionate in the way his hand lingered on Devon's arm or more perfect in the response of his courtesy to the few older people whom she had asked to meet him; but an amused look from Devon had reminded her of his private assurance of Ames's detestation of a dinner and of how rare it was for him to accept one. The light note of authority in him, so carefully separate from his personal humility, was necessarily predominant in the face of the questions put to him by an international lawyer, who had read him exhaustively, by a Harvard professor of Metaphysics, who wanted some points on a recent Stonyhurst course, and by a

railroad president, a devout Catholic, whose desire it was to found a chair of Scholastic Philosophy at a western university. During dinner he had rarely turned, from his seat beside Olive, to look at her; and if he did so his glance passed over her with the same rapid preoccupation with which it passed over the other faces, as if he noted between a thinker and a superstitious financier, between her mother-in-law and herself, only such differences as were differences of soul and the vast likenesses of humanity at large.

She had not needed Mrs. Devon's emphatic nod of admiration to assure her that she had shown throughout the evening that skill which, as she had instinctively known, was rarer than too marked a competence or too easily effusive a cordiality. She could fancy that her mother-in-law was once more exclaiming to herself that that was the marvel—the things she instinctively knew; that the guests were so carefully chosen and so few, the table and the food of so simple an arrangement; that she had displaced the other ladies present and put Mrs. Devon at Devon's right, and that she had asked a Catholic present to ask Father Ames to say grace, rather than to make the request herself. It was in the habit of her judgments to regard such occasions in the light of their tribute to her personal success; and she was conscious that her touch of management was so perfectly sure and firm that it was natural. The finer demands on her capacity and her intelligence which the evening had made had convinced her more than ever of all she had avoided—that her adaptability had not been too easy and too fluid, that her judgment held, even in the dazzle of all she couldn't possibly know, and that she was learning the

literature of the best, in all the habits of her taste, and not, like Mrs. Devon, its dangerous jargon. But where, she had asked herself, could she stand in Father Ames's point of view? He had once again the effect for her of creating a standard, of relegating the temporary to unimportance and extracting from the permanent its intrinsic values. The talk about the table, the subjects it touched, the streets outside and that sense of the city which was still so present to her, took their place in their relation to civilisation and history, as she listened to him; just as his smile at Mrs. Devon's absurdities did not change the fact, as he watched her, that he seemed amusedly conscious of her fractional relation to eternity.

He pursued, when he joined Olive after dinner, with a quick sign of recognition towards the few people scattered in the room. "I noticed your reticences because one doesn't often have them to notice here. What a great chance your countrymen have got—if only you don't waste your greatness in size! I've seen so much of you all in the past weeks, as I've travelled from place to place—and that's all wrong, you know: I should have been able to see so little! Life here must move, people must communicate—even at the cost of the experience;" he smiled; "and so I noticed what you didn't say."

"Reticences must be very full, Father, to reach the places in which you live!" Olive's voice had the tinge of antagonism which, with his tone, came to her instinctively.

"Oh, very!" Father Ames was completely acquiescent. "I should be an even poorer servant than I am if that weren't so. You see we Catholics have what one

might call the trained conscience; and a priest in particular has to learn to discern what it's his duty and obligation to hear from what's only a manifestation of life—which he judges, but in which he has no part." He turned in his chair towards her. "It must be strange,—may I say it? I thought of it the day when you and John were good enough to come to my rooms—it must be strange to be like you, and to have all one's idea of reality in information!"

Olive was silent for an instant. She had again the vital sense that their words, as they exchanged them, were like a series of events. Each one of his phrases, in its affective sequences, seemed to her to bring her to a decision or force her to a recognition more stirring than any accident or encounter of tangibility. What confounded her most in Ames was that she felt her habitual weapons to be useless. She was always fundamentally prepared for opposition, in her unfailing tendency to regard whoever resisted her insistence as an adversary; but she felt lost before the completeness of his refusal to treat her on any terms which were not his own.

She shifted her eyes to the group across the room, from the accentuated colours of the dresses which surrounded Mrs. Devon to the dark coats of the men.

"I suppose, Father, that you think I know nothing!" her brows drew impatiently together.

Father Ames laughed. "I should never be as presumptuous as that! But I do think, if you want me to answer you, that you know nothing"—he chose his words—"of the great tonic of idea. No—I really may be frank? You're so clever and rare a person, as I've told John, that one's struck by the absence

of certain things in you. You've got a marvellous will, but—remember, I've your permission!—you've no selective sense. Your ignorance hasn't yet become refusal. He had another deprecatory touch of amusement. "I've the hideous habit of the platform, you see; and you're giving me such a charming evening that I ought to be ashamed of myself! John tells me he's been reading the last Bryce. Have you, too, looked through it? A tired book, don't you think——?"

She interrupted him with a sudden gesture of intolerance. "Why don't you tell me at once," she brought out sharply, "that you think I'm all wrong? I'd much rather you said it directly."

Father Ames waited for the shortest second, as if he selected the key in which to pitch his reply. "Ah, I've more hope! For you to fancy I am accusing you of being, as you say, all wrong, is much more spiritually advanced than for you to fear my accusing you of ignorance! My dear Mrs. Devon, who am I to tell you how far you are, from one or the other?" His smile had an instant kindness. "I've no possible privilege to condemn you."

"But you do—your premises do; and they, to you . . ."

"Are everything, of course. But so are yours to you, I don't doubt. We've talked for possibly—all told—an hour; and if, in that short time, I haven't seen any scheme in your life, or—once more, you'll allow me?—in your thought, at least I very clearly realise that you're actuated by premises quite different from mine, and in which you probably profoundly believe."

"How absurd to suppose," her voice was sharper, "that I believe in anything! Don't you see, you who

see so much," she made a rapid gesture, "that that's my difficulty? Oh, no, not the usual scepticism of youth—you're too wise not to know that; but a disbelief in disbelief itself."

"And why?"

She felt definitely more than the question in his words, as if he had for the first time asked her for a personal disclosure.

"Because I'm made that way; action and reaction—they're equal and opposite in more than one science, aren't they? And more, because I'm trained that way. My old grandfather taught me a ritual as exact as yours, Father! Oh, what can you, with all your inheritances, know of what it is to be trained to question every conclusion, to undermine every supposition, to prick the bubble of every impression by a phrase, to interrogate every act for its absurdity or its insincerity . . ." Her hands clasped each other against the dark velvet of her dress. "No—it's useless to try to tell you!"

Father Ames's rapid smile again just showed. "Then why, if you're so completely trained, aren't you satisfied?"

The tensivity of Olive's concentration dissolved. Her eyes widened and her hands separated. "I don't know!" There was an impotence in her tone which she made no effort to attenuate.

He was thoughtful for a moment, with his glance set once more across the room and his face resting against his hand. "Does John know that you feel this—that you're dissatisfied with your inner life?"

"John!" Her voice vibrated with difference and then lowered again. "Oh, yes. I've told him; more

than that, he knows. He knows that I'm the last person on earth to be happy living an existence which I can't understand—where I've no premises."

"But you see it's not a question of your happiness! It's a matter far deeper. Tell me—you are a Protestant, aren't you?"

She again hesitated for a second. It had never occurred to her to define a bond the ludicrous aspect of which old Lacy had never subordinated to its other significance; and Ames's words called up in her mind an incongruous train of memories of the Ware church, of Abby's efforts with the choir, of the hardness of the bare benches, the clang of the bell before Sunday service, and of Mr. Basker.

"Yes, I suppose I could call myself a Protestant, in the same contradictory way that I'm everything else. Here, of course"—her hands rose to touch her breast—"I'm nothing."

Father Ames had again one of his prolonged pauses. The light of the intelligence in his face seemed to her even finer as he finally spoke. "But you want to be nothing!"

"No, no, no!" she caught him up. "I don't! I don't want to accept my moment of consciousness here quantitatively and crudely. I want everything—but I want the best! How is living to be worth while to me if I haven't comprehension and apprehension? How else am I get it all?"

"There's rather a difference, you know,"—his voice still kept the accent of what he said in the range of conversational comment—"between one's mind and one's soul. You must let me say that you seem to confuse your interests and your salvation!" His

words paused again. "You want to get a morality into your life—that I understand; and you're willing to work to get it. But once more, you'll forgive me if I say that to let a thing go isn't to renounce it. Renouncement is never a passive ignorance; and renouncement is never enough . . ."

"Then what you require is nothing less than everything?"

He shook his head. "What God requires."

"And there's no other way?"

"There's no other way but the way we have indicated to us. As one of the Catholic writers has said, that soul which is outside the church remains until death in the outer dark."

She fixed him as his words ended, with her eyes deepening under the pressure of her determination. "And have you any conception of what it means—to be a creature utterly alone?"

"I've seen, my dear Mrs. Devon, many creatures utterly alone; but don't forget that the facts which make you lonely are greater than you."

She waited for another instant and then broke out, with a sharp accent in her sudden irrelevance. "Why is it that you make me feel differently than anyone has ever made me feel? Oh, I've always resisted, Father—I and I'll resist you! I'm born to resistance. But remember how stripped I am—that in all your experience you've never seen anyone more completely a beggar."

Her voice had changed to a lower note of confidence, and from confidence to appeal, as if his presence brought out in her an intuitive imitation of the pitch of tone to which he would be most accustomed. His eyes, as they continued to meet hers, seemed to be measuring

this, as if his thoughts were running rapidly over his knowledge of the instant self-exposure of the American woman and the immediacy of her surrender.

"Ah, I fear—" his answer was slow enough to give her time to gather herself—"that you don't see how little we all make of personality! We want humanity in human beings—yes! You remember, perhaps, the story of the old Jesuit Superior who dismissed one of his novices because he had no passions? But there, after all, it is; one's got to lose one's soul to find it. . . ."

Olive held her pause for so long that the laughter mingled with Mrs. Devon's sharp notes, across the room, drifted to them. Her shoulders straightened and set at their habitual angle before she replied.

"Well, I must go my own way, then."

Father Ames's eyes left hers as he spoke. "If you are set on it, then you must!"

Her look was still on his face. "Are you off again at once?"

"No; I shall be here now, for six weeks or so. I've my lectures in and near New York; and I believe they've some new plan for me . . ."

"Then you will be lecturing here?"

"Yes,—there will be, I think, an announcement in the morning papers. I can't say it's to my taste—but since it seems to be the will of God . . ." his shoulders rose and fell.

"You detest it?" she asked quickly.

"Oh, unutterably!" He laughed. "I should have liked a quiet parish and a library. But I had enough of books, it appears, in my first youth; and now I'm condemned, I suppose forever, to talk about the

ASCENT

thoughts and doings of people whom I haven't the leisure properly to study. Some day perhaps——”

“Some day you'll change it?”

“Some day my superiors may change it. And now you must forgive me . . . I say the first mass to-morrow;” he rose and held out his hand; “and take my advice! Take to God those vague heresies which you so accurately express!”

XII

THE early June afternoon had in its air an oppressive stillness, above the clatter of the streets. Olive had closed the door and leaned against it, catching her breath in her satisfaction at finding the room empty. A week or so before Father Ames had mentioned, to her and Devon, that the lock was always on the latch, so that when young Father Croft was called over to the church, he and his secretary could get in and out without delay. She had met no one on the stairs; there was no sound from the inner room; and the dust-flecked light which flooded the open windows laid on everything the enchantment of a separation from the outer world.

Her thought had so 'enmeshed itself about the room, in the two months since she had first entered it, that she had the odd sense, as she glanced about her, of knowing it better than it existed. The flowers which were placed at the foot of the little column had no freshness fresher than her impression of them and the Virgin's slimness above them was no frailer than it had lived in her recollection. There still hung from the shoulders of the statue, with its fine links dropping motionlessly to the cross, the rosary she had flung over them. As her eyes caught it she felt the touch of a sudden feeling pass through her. The testimony that, through her own conflicts and contradictions of the past weeks, this contributive sign from her had remained, arrested her not with a sense of her importance but of its own. In the face of what it represented,

her struggles and her aspirations were suddenly reduced to an equal evanescence, like spray tossed against such solid perpetuity.

It was the single occasion, she reflected, that, in the constantly restless movement of her mind, any place had held her. She had recognised surroundings either to subordinate them to herself or to disregard them, as a setting of whose impermanence she was completely conscious. But the room, since first she entered it, had stood for the symbol of her stirred sense of form and meaning, consequence and derivation. Between its asceticism and its richness there was a moral balance which had given a sudden relevance to the loose manifestations of her hunger. It was here, she said to herself, that she had first awakened to the adventure of the passions of the intelligence, and had first realised that experience could have no savour for her without the comparison of a standard. The infusion of a sense of these relations into her uncharted existence seemed to her to have thrown all its dramatic significance into proportion.

Yet to realise when she stood, in the light of these fresh values, and to look forward, had also been to look back. She crossed the room to where the Virgin rose on her pedestal. Between the fixed serenity of the painted eyes and the turmoil of her own there stretched, as she felt, every moment of the recent weeks. They laid on her a hand of reclamation. . . .

The stages by which she had come to the recognition of an authority outside her own marked the passage of the recent days more than any division of time. Her constant sense that she was progressing to a pre-conceived end had penetrated her until, with a twist

of her imagination, she could regard it as having the poignancy of the fatalistic. She remembered first her powerlessness to fling off the impression of Father Ames's lectures. His inaccessibility was explained to her anew, every time she heard him, as if the crowd which separated him from her were symbolic of the thronged issues of life which stood between them. Yet she never turned, as she went out, to catch a final glimpse of his prepossessed look, that she did not equally feel that what enchained her most was the mystery as to how, in the midst of such galling routine, he kept his fervour. The contradiction of the two was a continual excitation to her. Each time they met she had felt the perfect withdrawal of his predestination. But she had felt no less all that had put softness into his severity and fire into his opinions; and she began insensibly to turn and regard herself in the light of them.

In their earlier talks, the touch of his thoughts on hers had invariably involved a clash of her judgment with his, and her display of a defiance of his conclusions which, as she was always the first to tell him, was only show. But with the passage of each week, the stimulation of her sense of combat had seemed to her more and more, in the light of his amused smile, a mere agility. The circumstances in which they met deepened this impression. As the spring grew later, Devon had suggested that his quiet library, with such masses of books at hand that even Ames might condescend to glance at, was a better place to put together his lectures than Father Croft's room, with its incessant interruptions. Olive never passed Father Ames on the stairs or watched him across the table, on the rare occasions

when he could be persuaded to stay to lunch, without being conscious of an alteration in herself. Old Lacy's penetration in her was too just for her not to see that this influence was not a temporary fashion of her opinion. It was daily apparent to her, in the swing of their arguments, in the sudden thrust of her contradictions and the sudden surrender of her point of view, that she was sacrificing something of the integrity of her individualism. The delicate pleasure involved in the abandonment of her cult of a hard personality had shaken her old premises and certainties; and the distances she had travelled had not yet struck her as forcibly as when she looked up at the statue, with the sense of all its significance to Ames. . . .

She turned abruptly. An instinct of defensiveness rose in her for an instant, so powerfully that she felt herself caught in the sharp revulsion of revolt. Her eyes ran over the room with a new and harder intelligence. What, after all, had led her to yield herself to this adventure of incongruity? The piety of the objects on the wall and strewn over the tables seemed to her suddenly thin; why had she not sooner seen, she wondered, the attitude in it? The beat and roar of the streets below filled her thoughts for a moment; why, she wondered, had she done so fantastic a thing as to come? Father Ames had made, four or five days before, one of his swift departures, with only a telephone message from his secretary to explain that for the rest of the week he would not trouble them to let him use the library. She had seen in the papers, the same morning, that he had just returned, from Baltimore, and was to speak in the evening; and she had instantly assumed, as an opportunity of seeing

him, the obligation to tell him that his books and papers were on Devon's table and waiting for him where he had left them. Yet had she a real desire—she put it to herself with a touch of roughness—to see him? In her momentary reaction even his compelling figure paled and all its outlines wavered and faded into unreality. Their terms of thought were so fatally different, she told herself, that if she confessed to him the inspiration of feeling which had brought her, he would put it down as a cheap fugitive impulse. . . .

Her back had been towards the door when she was aware of a light sound, and as she wheeled about she saw him standing on the threshold. She had heard no preliminary step on the stairs, and she had been confident that the other rooms were empty; yet she had been so possessed by her reflections of the last moments that she looked at him with a preoccupation beyond surprise. He evidently caught something of the conflicting uncertainties in her face, for without speaking he closed the door and confronted her.

As the seconds passed, it seemed to her that they had never before exchanged a glance so clear and sustained. His look was none the less perfectly a defence of his thought; but for the first time she felt it admitted and revealed to her as defence, and as an infinitely fine assemblage of his array of weapons.

He was silent for so long that when she spoke she was conscious of his tacit admission that the tone of their talk was to be beyond the usual exchange.

"Well, Father, I offer no apology for coming. I'd scarcely one framed in my head—but if I had I shouldn't use it!"

ASCENT

Father Ames took her up instantly. "No apology is ever necessary in coming here. That's what a priest expects; and people are in and out all day, to see Father Croft if not to see me."

Olive's smile dealt for a second with the accent in which he spoke.

"You dispose easily enough of my being here; perhaps you will be stirred a little more out of your point of view—your comfortable point of view—when I tell you what brought me. I'm here to say nothing more or less than that I can't go on seeing you."

Father Ames remained motionless. Only his eyes carried his animation and returned it to meet her insistence.

She pursued, with another brief touch of her irony. "I've little illusion about it; you will do me the justice to admit I'm honest! I've made and unmade this decision a hundred times; but each time it's none the less a decision, and since you and John will always have so close a friendship—you understand? It's quite clear? I shan't come here again, nor, if I can help it, see you again."

"Why not?" His voice was as rapid as before.

"Why not—as if I could answer that! You must ask so deep a question of your famous God . . ." She cut herself off. "Oh, I don't know any reason. I know only the condition—that I can't go on as I am, that I can't see you."

"My dear Mrs. Devon," his tone was measured to the lightest shading, "I must really ask you to leave me out of what is a matter of the salvation of your soul!"

"Your phrase will do well enough to cover it, I

suppose." Her retort was as quick as his. "I have come to suspect, you know, that your terms of morality are sometimes convenient! Oh, I don't mean to be harsh, and you'll have to forgive me if I am. The truth, quite simply, is that you've brought me to a new state of mind, you've put me face to face with these things, and yet you refuse to solve them for me. That's what you regard as fair. No, I tell you I'm utterly miserable. . . ."

For a second their silence hung between them; then Father Ames's hand made a sudden motion, in the direction, she saw, of the little Virgin on the pedestal.

"It's my profound belief that in His time God will solve them for you; meanwhile, may I say that I scarcely think your judgment of them goes beyond a momentary feeling." His smile showed for an instant, as if he consciously eased the strain of her attitude. "You've never read, I suppose, that greatest of the mystics, who says that faith must be both 'certain and obscure.' Yours—we must admit it—isn't yet strong enough to be either."

"That's what you say, and that's what of course you think. But I have tried to believe; indeed, I've most truly tried! And what's the result? There's something in me which drops like an acid on the first motion of belief. It's always whispering over my shoulder. . . . I question and I deny with each breath I draw. I know I never lived any sort of life until I came to this pass; but the question now is, how am I to go on living it at all?" She stretched her hand towards him, with a sharp gesture. "It's you, Father, who've done it to me, done it as evidently and directly as anything's ever been evident and direct. In the last

weeks, since I've seen you and listened to you, there's never been a day . . ." she caught and controlled her voice. "Oh, I know you've said nothing direct! But you've changed me. I'm different, my premises are vanished, you've shaken my confidence. I don't know where I am or where I'm going. . . ."

He arrested her. "Ah, I've seen your suffering. I believe it's been deep, and I'm sorrier for it than I can say; but——"

She confronted him steadily. "But you haven't understood it."

"You must let me remind you that it's scarcely been my business to understand it."

"Oh, I know all that!" Her impatience flared up like a light. "But what's a theoretic pity at the place I've reached? I can't exist, I can't go through this routine called living, without belief; that much I know; and yet I can't believe. It's grim enough, isn't it? You've killed my trust in nothingness, and yet you haven't given me a God. I go to mass—why? Because you would want me to; not because I want to; and I come away—well, critical and incredulous, and asking myself how on earth it can mean to you what it does. I read the books I hear you speak of, because you've named them; if it were anyone else who cited them, I'd laugh in his face. . . ." She held herself again. "I've tried, Father—believe it or not, but I have. I've tried to imagine what you'd think I ought to do, and to do it. I've made sacrifices that were intimate and cruel. . . ."

Father Ames's response also hung for an instant. His eyes seemed to play on the new exposure of her beauty which came with the exposure of her pain, and

then his slight smile recurred. "Don't we all make them—such sacrifices? And are they really, in the light of larger things, very important?"

Her voice sharpened, as if she instinctively felt the sharper thrust necessary to penetrate his sympathy. "Yes, but do you know how intimate they've been—and how cruel?" She took a step nearer him. "Do you know that it's because of what you think is a woman's duty that I've made up my mind to have a child? Oh, yes,—I've made up my mind to it! It is not a case, with a person like me, of the will of heaven or of the accidents of feeling. I've told John I want a child, and I'll have one—I'll go through what I must go through because I know as well as if you'd said it that it lifts me an infinitesimal bit higher in your judgment. You see,"—she made a wide gesture—"there's the beginning and the end of it. I've tried to believe—and I've succeeded only in believing in you."

Father Ames confronted her with his silence still complete. But as she ended, it reached her confused consciousness that for the first time she was seeing in his face the force of his certitude, in all its structural parts. Even in her exaltation she traced for an instant, in its profound pity, the history of the growth of his sympathy, the turbulences he must have seen people traverse, the wreckage he had had made of his confidence and the dust into which some of his conquests must have fallen. Then his expression changed to its habitual aspect. He drew out his watch, crossed the room to his desk and selected with a critical hand a sheaf of papers from those which encumbered it.

"When you are ready to view this matter in its proper proportions, we'll talk of it. I'm always—need

I say it?—at your service. You've complicated your question, so far. Your immense—and very generous—responsiveness and your keen creative sense have lost the mass for you in detail. That will pass soon enough. Until then—" he bent his eyes again on the papers he held, and detached one or two of them. "I'm lecturing to-night, and I've just had news, in this worst of rushed days, of the arrival of my old friend Terence Bourdas and his sister. They sail for home to-morrow, and I'd sent you a note, which must just have missed you, to your house, to say what pleasure it would give me if you could find a moment to call on Lady Isabel. Perhaps you could make time to run in early this afternoon? I shall hope to save half an hour to see her myself, just before dinner—if only things are kind to me! You'll find her one of the most remarkable of unremarkable women."

The impenetrability of his voice seemed to close like a wall around her. She dropped into a chair and pressed her hands to her face.

"So that," she broke out, "is all it means to you!"

His voice sounded to her as if it had travelled an immeasurable length before it reached her.

"Do you seriously think that after my life as a priest the suffering of a human soul means nothing to me?"

She had never so clearly felt in his tone the note of his office. Under its impact she wavered for a second and then rose. Her tears trembled on her cheeks, as she tried to steady herself. Then she managed to raise her hands, and touched, uncertainly, her hair and the lace on her dress.

"I can only apologise to you, Father. I can't imagine

what has made me burden you with all this complaint. Let us call it the heat. It was really most inconsiderate of me to drop in here, in this sudden way." The fixity of his eyes steadied her, and she pursued. "Yes, of course, I'll go to see Lady Isabel. Your note's at the house, you say, with her address? And has Father Croft, do you suppose, such a thing as a mirror? If there's one anywhere about, I should like to see if all this hysteria I've imposed on you hasn't perhaps disarranged my hat. . . ."

XIII

“**I**F you know, Father, how completely enchanted I am to see you!”

Lady Isabel had caught his hand with the same eagerness which warmed her eyes and her large smile. “What a dreadful dreary little room in which to talk to you—you whom one would always want to see in such delicious quiet places; no, don’t reproach me! I’ll put up with it! I couldn’t very well do less, considering all you yourself have had to bear of hotels and turmoil. And now tell me; tell me, please, all that’s happened!”

Father Ames, for an instant, reflected the pleasure of her smile in his own, without speaking; and in his pause the first thing of which he was aware was that here, confronting him, was the person who had always best comprehended his silences. Ever since his fifth or sixth year, and hers, it had been inevitable to him that when he met her frank and frequently impatient eyes, he should meet in them this sudden apprehension. He could remember it, in days of games in which he had usually been the most turbulent and the wildest, in his childish punishments, his sicknesses and his recoveries, and through all the uncertainties of his last youth and his first maturity. One of the most valuable things about Isabel Bourdas, he had always thought, was the muteness essential in her sympathy. She had never expressed a solicitude or uttered a comment; and this had made him trust her to see the signs of inner experi-

ences as intricate as those he traversed before he took his vows. She was instinctively incapable of pausing at the detail; he fancied her always, in his view of her, with her sharp experienced gaze on nothing nearer than the horizon, and her rigidity of judgment only for herself.

As he had waited for her, in the hotel sitting room perched high above the out-spread city, and with its windows full of the late afternoon light, he had thought, as he watched the vast outlook with all its effulgent vitality flaring up to the sky, how empty his past months had been not only of such a presence but of such surroundings as produced it. It was significant that this was the first hour in which he had drawn breath slowly enough to measure this lack—the first when he had extricated himself, on his receipt of Isabel's note, from the intricacies of his engagements for any personal reason. He had known with exactitude that it was not merely the long sequence of rooms like this and of views like the one beyond, of a constant succession of duties which it required all his will to save from the crystallisation of monotony and minds which one's best sincerity couldn't penetrate, which had touched the springs of his energy to the point of an exhaustion. For some years the terms of his intellect had been the terms of his activity, as the terms of his faith were those of his subsistence. There had never existed any doubt in his judgment, any more than in the judgment of his superiors, that his services were to be by means of a mind which was so plainly prepared to be an instrument. His lectures had begun early, his preaching had immediately been a duty, and the lines of his special use had always been clear.

But in the last weeks his thirst for a change to some comparative peace had slowly allied itself to a thirst for a change in his spiritual apprehension, as if the confused traffic of life through which he had passed had exposed to him the nudity of the constructive parts of existence.

In his last months in Europe, several of which he spent in Rome, the fatigue of a too constant concentration had—as he had recently begun to think—already touched him. He was perpetually used for service in situations where he was in attack or defence. The unrelaxing strain of this attitude took something from him beside meditation. He had sometimes wondered if his religious ardour itself did fan to flame more slowly and if it had not less penetration in its heat. He remembered in particular one cold spring afternoon when he had spent hours, after a ceremony in St. Peter's, with the Cardinal-Secretary. The dim rooms, filled with the touches of red and violet, the smooth insistence of the English Cardinal who was recommending that he be sent to America, the delicate flattery which had been accorded him, all the fine machinery of so immensely simple a whole had never seemed to him of a closer perfection, nor that perfection more nearly wearisome in its inexorable completeness. As soon as he was released he had gone back to the rooms he occupied, over a little fruit shop in the Bocca di Leone; and seated at his writing table, with his head in his hands, he had let the dusk deepen as the force of his prayer for isolation deepened, and for the freedom to express in his outer occupation the felt mystery of his inner life. . . .

He turned back from his thoughts, with an effort,

to face his companion, as she sat on the sofa beside him.

"My dear child, if you've any notion of how good it is to have you here! When I found your note on my desk this morning, I could think only of my gratitude—except that I thought, too, as I always do, of how Miss Hibson—you remember Miss Hibson, our worst governess?—used to scold you for the way you made your g's. And Terence—where's he?"

"Oh, Terence has gone to pore over the fourteenth century woodcuts in the museum, of course. He started after breakfast and I probably shan't see him until midnight; though if he'd known you were coming—! You may find him, at any moment, on your doormat, like the faithful, shaggy creature he is. If you knew how I thank heaven for him! Since all the rest of us are so magnificently married and placed, it seems as if we two had just been meant for this—to see each other through. You know, since you've been away, that I've definitely become the lonely old maid of fiction!"

The intelligence in Father Ames's eyes deepened. "Yes—I heard."

"You saw in the papers, I suppose?" She put her question with no change in her smile.

"Could one escape it?"

Lady Isabel laughed. "It was rather heralded, I admit. Francis always has his eye on possible constituents, hasn't he? And he's very far up, you know—immeasurably far up. Father says that if there were a division to-morrow, he'd head the party as inevitably as dawn follows night."

"And you thought it was better—?" The delicacy in his tone seemed a link in the long chain of consideration which bound him to her.

"Oh, obviously! You've always told me, you know, that it oughtn't to come off,—our marriage. Yes—and I know what you've always thought of Francis. Oh, I don't deny it! But isn't it all according to chance, to opportunity, to a luck he's never had—for all his amazing luck? He's a simple person, you know, and he needed the simplest discipline. He needs the luck of the right unsuccesses and the right failures." She made an impatient gesture. "You see I've had my revolts, my scepticisms, my arguments which were both sensible and foolish! But the end was that one afternoon, when we were sitting stolidly over the tea table, I told him our engagement had become a myth, that people were tired of it, that even after two years I wasn't yet convinced it was best it should come to anything, and that he ought to marry."

"And he acquiesced?"

"He asked me," her smile was rapid—"of course he asked me, what the Duke thought. I said father thought quite simply nothing—he was too busy with salmon; and I also pointed out—what I was sure he hadn't noticed!—that Mrs. Montagu was a widow. Not divorced—he's clever enough to see the disadvantage of that kind of perpetual remarriage—but a widow. Oh, she's already doing magnificently for him, she and her millions. She's as indispensable to him as his horses and his secretaries. She has a hard effulgence which is admirable in public; one rarely sees her, yet she's always there. So, as I tell you . . ."

Father Ames's hand touched her arm. "I think the thing I'm gladdest you have is your recognition of what it's cost you, your generosity of payment, your sense of proportion and of result. No—I have

always been completely confident in your judgment. I've prayed for you and I've thought of you—need I say it? And I've had my comfort, not only in the fact that you were right, but in all you have to do, in your privileges and responsibilities."

"Yes; I know all that." Lady Isabel shook her head. "But the world's so changed; and when it comes down to the truth, there's nothing in particular that I'm good for. What is a woman good for, who's seen the world go by, as I've seen it go by at Brough, and yet who's never been part of it? who's heard everything discussed, and yet who's never been of any use in the discussion? My situations have all been simple—too simple! Don't you see, Father,—there's been nothing to relate me to life? I open a bazaar now and again, I trot about with father, I go down to Harringford if Minnie wants to yacht and the children are ill. And Terry—there's always dear Terry. . . ." She ended, and in an abrupt instant her tone altered. "But it would have been a great luxury to me if I had been able never to see Francis again!"

The sensitiveness of his face wavered. "Ah, I can imagine . . .!"

Isabel Bourdas, with her eyes kept toward the window, made a quick gesture.

"Why, with you, is one perpetually in the confessional? Oh, I don't mean that you're always testing and pardoning—though your judgment always does seem to me to test and your taste to pardon! But you draw out something in one—draw out a definition of one's life. I'm not silent with other people—you know that! But I'm silent with myself, and you make me break all those ugly reticences. . . . How much

lovelier to have lovely complex armour like yours, all inlaid with golden flowers, to make one forget its protective use!" Her smile was touched for a moment with the intricacies of her knowledge of him. "But you can't divert me from the personal! What has made you look so tired?"

Father Ames returned her amusement. "You mean that I generally manage to conceal myself better? After all, I suppose, it's a wonder that I'm alive, with a lecture in Quebec one minute and in the south the next. But as if one minded that, if one's body can stand it; and thank heaven mine can!"

"You've had a terrific success."

"The Archbishop here seems to think it hasn't gone so badly. I've seen a few helpful and delightful men; I've had a few responsive audiences; for the rest—" His shoulders rose and fell; he had risen to stand in front of the ornate brass-trimmed hearth and the fireless grate, and his eyes passed over the room, whose only personality seemed to be in the long-accumulated signs of transient occupancies. "For the rest, if you ask me what has happened, nothing's happened. My life has been as dead as these walls."

Lady Isabel nodded, with her eyes on her large white hands, clasped on her knee. When she next raised her look it had a touch of something more intimately alive with the recollections of their companionship.

"I know! If only you'd been born a Franciscan—haven't I often said it? Your intellectuality is almost too unbelievably aristocratic; you simply can't help all your preferences and your refusals; you simply can't save yourself from your delicacies. You, you

ASCENT

see, have inflexions of thought; the rest of us have just thoughts. We all live on the manifestations of life, and you—you live on its causes!”

“Well, if it be the will of God,” Father Ames laughed—“I’ll do in the future a little better by those causes. When I was young, or younger, I used to think I’d try for a parish in the East End; but now I know that if I could choose it would be something far different. It isn’t so much that I want to get away from all this over-activity of the mind—it’s that I want to get beneath it.” He made one of his quick gestures. “I want to let my inner self breathe, to search for those hidden mysteries which lie beyond the senses. That’s why I sometimes pray,” his eyes caught her eyes, “that I may be allowed to end in a monastic life.”

She met the gravity of his look for another second and then drew her brows together, as if she refused the idea consideration. “As if I hadn’t always seen it hovering over you, ever since I can remember anything! And as if I hadn’t always been convinced of the utter impossibility of it! You, with your rapidity, your trained attack—no, you couldn’t!”

His smile again disposed of the intolerance of her tone. “It’s all very well to say no, but I very well could! Oh, sometimes all the trend of things seems to me so clearly towards it! I, who’ve expounded theories, to be free at last to deal perpetually in the drama of the religious existence; to deal, after all my theological differentiations, in a community of spirit which lies forever beyond question. If you knew how tired I am of individualism! It’s what I’ve most detested and what I’ve most

prayed to be saved—all this surface development of the human being and this neglect of his soul!”

She could only repeat her protestation. “It’s out of the question. It would be too much against the very talents heaven has given you—it would be a brutal wrong.” Her glance sharpened, as it bent on him. “Is this what America’s done to you?”

He was as instant as she. “And do you think I’d blame poor America, if I considered it had led me to a spiritual advancement? No, but what America has done for me is to make me wonder what I am. Do I at all exist, except as a kind of trickster, playing with the right weapons,—yes!—but always juggling! Oh, I hope I needn’t tell you that if ever God gives me this grace, it’s a move I’ll make with all of me—that the continuity with me will strive to be organic, and not mere form—that my soul will take all the vows!” He drew out his watch. “And now let me ask you—you saw Mrs. Devon?”

Isabel turned with an evident difficulty from her thoughts. “Yes. She came, of course. And of course I thought her extraordinary. We talked for half an hour, in the politest phrases; and at the end—” her attention fixed itself again on him. “Why in the world did you want me to see her?”

Father Ames’s face lightened with his ease. “I scarcely expected you to find each other out! Yes, she’s extraordinary enough. So extraordinary that, as you’ll see, it’s easier for me to tell you who she is than what. You don’t perhaps remember Devon, the most charming of men, full of sensitiveness and intelligence? He was up at Oxford for a year when I was so frequently there, and I may or may not have taken

him for a week-end to you at Trant—no, I think not. But what you probably can't help remembering is his mother, a very pretty woman who's eternally at royal garden parties. . . ."

He had run along under the fixity of her gaze, which deepened to recollection as she answered.

"I have a thread of remembrance. Someone brought her to see us, a year or so ago. But nothing like her husband or her mother-in-law explains this girl."

"No, nothing short of larger causes. She's beyond the usual definition. That's why—" his eyes again softened—"I wanted her to know you; why, knowing you had only this one day before sailing, I asked you to give her half an hour."

Isabel had a touch of impatience for his explanation. "As if you had to say such things to me! Yet—"

"Yes, that's what I too say to myself. Yet what can one do? I've seen her and her husband constantly. In these last weeks, since the spring turned so warm, they've let me have Devon's library to work in, where I had silence and a breeze. They've been endlessly kind to me; yet there it is. For him I'd do quite simply anything, and for her—what I can. But how is one to reach her? How is one ever to touch such a surface?"

Isabel's raillery seemed to be compounded of the variety of her experiences. "You never used to proselytise!"

He seemed to have been carried, with his thoughts, beyond her exclamation.

"The first time I saw Mrs. Devon, I hope I had also the vision to see beneath her attitude of mind, just as one sees beneath what is really the attitude

of her beauty. Not solely for Devon's sake, no; very much so, but not solely, since she's after all got a soul of her own." He waited. "That's why I wanted you to see her—because she has got her soul to deal with, and no dealing short of her soul will help her. And I wanted her to see you because I wanted her to see what the Church does for a woman of your type—even in such ways as she could penetrate." He paused again. "Your eyes are keen enough, my dear Isabel, to have caught the fact that if she is very amazing she is also very sad."

Lady Isabel's tart glance seemed to question the word for a moment; then her hand continued to smooth back her thick hair, which was half dark and half touched with grey. "I admit she's elusive! She came in most charmingly, saying how good it was of me to see her and of you to have sent her, and all that. Couldn't she do anything to help us get off to-morrow, and couldn't we possibly delay? It was all beautifully managed. But not for one instant did I touch her. Oh, she was clever; clever enough not to care who I was, or about Brough and all the rest of it. She told me she knew very little, that she'd lived in the country and read all her life and had had no opportunities, that she longed to travel, that she longed to do this and that. But somehow, at the end, she had slipped through my fingers like water. Here was I, definite and placed, just as definable as my hands and feet; and there was she—nothing." She hesitated. "Yes, she is sad. I see it. You're right, as usual." She waited again. "What she really left me with, in spite of all her loveliness—and it is lovely—and her cleverness and her nervous vitality, was the

fact that you alone, of all people, could have the science and the fineness to penetrate her."

"I knew you'd see it—oh, not that I could help her, but that she must have help, and of the most difficult kind to lend; and that once you'd seen it, you'd give me the touch of your intuition, in dealing with her—" Father Ames's brows drew together. "Of course just at first she sweeps one off one's feet. It's all the youth of the world which confronts one, isn't it? But in another second it's all changed into impermanence, into the tragic lack of any basic experience. Sad!—the more I see of her, the sadder she is. Yet tragic is just what she isn't. One needs a consciousness, a contrast, a choice, a problem and a *dénouement*, for the tragic; and she's quite incapable of it."

Isabel broke into a note of acquiescence. "Yes, incapable. And even her loveliness——"

"Ah, even her loveliness isn't subtle—it's just complex. There's no straightness in her to make alive the straightness of her beautiful back! The disconcerting thing is that she looks fine things and isn't fine"—he had turned restlessly up and down the room, and as he reached the window he paused for an instant beside it.—"Like all this out here! It's large, but it's not fine. There's no consistent development, no education; all its eagerness is greed and all its aspiration is restlessness. And till a soul or a people is lifted—!" He broke off, with a resigned amusement at himself. "So you see Mrs. Devon has stirred me; stirred my pity and stirred my interest because she represents difficulties more difficult than herself." He turned, and sank on the sofa beside her.

"There's only one solution for her, and that's the Church."

"You think, then—?" Her tone was full of a dry uncertainty, but her eyes hung on the affirmations of his look with the practice of a long recognition of authority.

"I think that if ever a being was adrift outside the Church, it's she. She needs direction, she needs an enforced recognition of what's beyond her mind. And I wanted her to see," he once more caught her eyes, "all that, in all the centuries that your blood has been of it, it's done for you. Oh, she must come to it herself, and she thinks now that she never will. But if ever she does consider it, she'll remember you—she'll have been struck by your wisdom and your tolerance, and the way life has left you only richer. One gets that much, you know, even in half an hour!"

Lady Isabel's smile hesitated for a second.

"I don't believe she saw anything beyond the way I dressed!"

Father Ames rose. "Ah, well, always remember that converts are made by reaction! I'm going to make the time—how I don't know, but somehow—to see you and Terence for a second in the morning. Thank you, my child; and in the autumn, perhaps, in London. . . ."

"You think you'll then be home?"

"I think nothing—I know nothing. I know only what I must do to-morrow." He drew a rapid breath. "You must pray for me—I'm very tired. And one of these days, when we talk again, I'll finish the history of Mrs. Devon's soul—or rather the Church will!"

Isabel shook her head, with her lucidity still sharp. "I can't see her with a soul!"

"Then we must help her to find it!" His retort, as he turned back from the door, was clear with his usual energy. "No—I know it's a puzzle. Sometimes I've said to myself that the only explanation of her is that she's a genius; and she pays the penalty of a genius without a talent—! Then to-morrow, my dear Isabel?——"

XIV

OLIVE had clearly decided that she would not sleep that night. She had left Devon after dinner and gone to her room; and wrapped in her dressing gown she had dropped into a chair by her window, with her thoughts swept up to the stars by the turmoil in her mind.

This small break in the sequences of her habit seemed to her like a first sign of the difference in the integral causes of all her habits. One of the excitements of the decision on the brink of which she found herself was her consciousness that it would initiate her into a new code of custom and new rules of daily performance. She felt herself about to enter a world whose presuppositions allowed for and consecrated the emotional in human experience—consecrated the vigils of self-analysis and the prostration of penitence no less than the exaltation of absolution. To steep herself not only in the richness of a ritual but to have all her curiosity stirred by the conflicts and exactions of a moral order, brought a new actuality close to her. All her drama, even in the sordid conditions of Ware, seemed to her, as she looked back at it, to have been theoretic—the drama of an attitude rather than of a participation. She felt that for the first time her inner barriers were broken and the fibres of her resistances dissolved, and that with the end of her conflict she had passed into a definable connection with existence.

She put it in the terms of conflict, and not of conviction. For weeks she had been increasingly aware that her character had been subjected to the influence of a strong determinant; or, as she seemed to hear Mr. Lacy's corrective voice reminding her, if not her character at least her own view of her character. The threat of this irruption had been in itself a stimulant. She had never before experienced the magnetism of idea; not the tart pleasure of her definitions or the gymnastic quality of her brilliancy, but of a force extraneous to herself and with an authority outside her personal presuppositions. In her immediate recognition of the power of Father Ames's weapons and the integrity of his authority, she had reversed her usual term of conquest and seen the immeasurable opportunity of being conquered. It must be a surrender which proceeded, to give it its full value, bit by bit. She had measured its progress by the slightest signs. She knew that the tone of his predominance had never varied, as their meetings became more constant. It was in herself that she had felt the sudden insecurity which had meant, as she recognised, the approach to a final issue.

The gathering wave of her uncertainties had never risen higher than during her unexpected moments with him that afternoon. Yet her baffled sense of her incapacity to shake him had never been less deniable; and she had descended the stairs with the conviction that any question of her conversion was a madness. In her car, as she drove home, she had even composed the brief sharp note which should tell him that her words with him had been definitely her last. It was not until she stood in her hall again and picked up

from the table the note he had sent her earlier, expressing his hope that she would go to see Lady Isabel Bourdas, that she had felt the arrest of a hesitation. As she turned the phrases over and over, with their easily carried allusions to a deep friendship and the personality of an old relation, an inexplicable curiosity had leapt up in her. It was the last impulse for which she was, at the moment, prepared. Her moments with Father Ames had left her too sore for the stir of such an interest; but something unsatisfied in her mind had made her glance at her watch to see if it was too late, turn back to the car, and give the address of the hotel to her chauffeur.

When she found herself beside Lady Isabel, and across what she felt to be the careful banality of their phrases, she had been able to define this curiosity. The very fact of Isabel's presence, the width of her implications and the inevitability of her reserves, had thrown open sudden vistas down which Olive's rapid thoughts travelled. All the intricacies of the interdependence between her and Father Ames were as apparent as all its ultimate simplicities. As she looked, from her seat beside Isabel, over to the hard afternoon light which streamed in the north windows, she was dimly divining the Ames she had never known. The delicate threads which bind confessor and penitent were stretched before her, in all the fineness of their construction and their responsiveness to human emotion. The excitement of her ignorance had never before so irritated her. She felt for the first time the imperative necessity to have a hand laid firmly on her personal assertiveness. From time to time there drifted across the increasingly clear landscape of her thoughts the

remembrance of Mr. Lacy's old phrases concerning her protean quality and that if she were unchangeable it was because she so readily changed. But the present moment seemed to her to touch so vitally her inner sanctities that it was proof enough of their existence. Her lips had set with determination; and as she held out her hand to Lady Isabel she was conscious that her decision had been taken.

She saw the stars brighten to white and the dawn come with a sudden surprise. The hour had never had any reality of existence for her, in itself; but while the familiar room grew grey, she felt the extraordinary poignancy of the re-emergence of life and the cold verities of the thin light. She flung herself by her bed on her knees; and as her words broke from her—bits of Catholic invocations she had read, a line or two from the Episcopal services and a verse of a strident Baptist hymn, the only approach to prayers which she knew,—it struck her that this was the first time she had ever made any attempt to pray, except for momentary supplications to be delivered from the infliction of old Norah's talkativeness or Philip's presence; and the strangeness of lifting her mind from the tangible held her, for a moment, motionless and confused.

As she fastened her dress before her mirror she realised how she had already been touched by her determination. Her shoulders drooped with the fatigue of her sleeplessness, her face had a dull pallor and her eyes were deeply circled. Something made her glad, as she regarded herself, of this extinction of her beauty; even in its momentary sacrifice, she felt she had

attained a comprehension of Father Ames's standard of what either gave appearance a soul or turned it into a vulgarism.

The streets, as she slipped out of the house, had all the silence of the earliest morning. But the few slinking figures she passed, as she crossed the park and entered the poorer quarter, struck her, through their sordidness, with a human quality. She had never speculated, she realised, as to the mechanics of any lives outside her own; and now she had a sudden sense of the significance of the hulking men and the occasional girls with too adroit eyes.

A woman whom she had not seen before was scrubbing the entry as she went up the steps of Father Ames's house, and turned to look at her with a half-awakened resentment. What did Olive want, anyway, she asked? If it was the priests, they weren't there; the younger one was away somewhere—he'd left in the evening with a bag; and the older one—the Englishman—had been sent for, an hour before, to go to a dying woman. With this she resumed her scrubbing, pouring the greyish water over the blotched marble and leaving untouched the corners clogged with dust, as if she were aware of the hopelessness of her task.

"And there's no use in taking up my time, neither," she flung over her shoulder, as she proceeded.

Olive stared at her for a moment, with her thoughts revolving around the strange disarray, at this unheard-of hour—it was barely half past six—of custom and of authority.

"Do you know where he's gone, the English priest? You say he was sent for; was it to go far?"

The woman jerked her head over her shoulder.

"It's down the block here, to the Healeys'. The same side, a few doors farther on—number 431, on the ground floor." She straightened on her knees, with an abrupt ferocity. "And who are you, I'd like to know, coming at such a time?"

Olive returned her look steadily. "I'm one of Father Ames's penitents;" the words gave her a light flush, as she pronounced them, and as she saw the immediacy with which the woman's face changed.

"Well, it's all right, then; 431, and the ground floor," and she became reabsorbed in her scrubbing.

It was at once apparent, in the entry of the house further down the street, that even in this crowded environment where the shocks of eventuality must pass so obscurely, more than the usual morning occupations were stirring. The door of the ground floor flat stood ajar; and as Olive slipped across the threshold she heard a voice which she instantly recognised as Father Ames's, coming from what was evidently the front room of the flat.

Pressed against the wall, in the dark hall-way, she covered her face with her hands and listened. The words began gradually to pierce her strained attention. She had never before heard the Litany of the Dying. Its phrases, in their sonorous poignancy, broke into the empty spaces of her mind; and as they penetrated her they seemed to her to spread Father Ames's scale of perpetuity before her. She saw for the first time his view of the universal balance, the brevity of existence and the vastness of a hereafter, the instabilities of living and the certitude of eternity, and the sand and water which these huge measurements made of the present moment.

ASCENT

With her utmost sense of urgency she tried to abandon her resistance and to believe herself caught up in the immense movement of the prayers. Every fibre of her mind was alive with the desire to follow her emotion; but from the open door, and along the little passage, there seemed to creep upon her, as if she saw it, a terror of actuality. The flight of each second took her more bodily and inevitably back to the days of her grandfather's death. She recovered their briefest details, with the vividness of a vision; how he had lain, how he had looked—not when he was dead, for that, after all, had had the finality of the inexorable, but when his last spark of life was battling against the encroaching indignity of dissolution. The words beat now against her ears and penetrated no farther. All that filled her mind, until she had forgotten every circumstance of her coming and of Ames, was her certainty that because of some physical weakness, by a turn of accident or by the stupid swerve of a car in the street, she herself must ultimately face this unescapable fact.

The revulsion which caught her was so bodily that, with a vague sense that she must not lose her self-command, she turned to try to find, along the dark wall, the outlet of the door. As she moved forward a threshold at the farthest end of the hall was darkened for an instant by a figure which crossed it, and Father Ames came towards her.

She put out her hand to arrest him, with her back still against the wall, and aware that her unsteadiness shook her voice.

"Father, I must speak to you! Stop—don't you know me? It's I, Olive Devon."

He wavered and paused.

"No, it's not possible! Mrs. Devon! What is it? You want to see me?" He drew his hand across his eyes, as if he made a visible effort to clear his mind. "Where can we go for a moment, I wonder? There's a little room, I think, across the hall. Will you come this way, here?"

She followed him into the little bedroom, and while he drew forward the single chair she looked around her. The room was filled by the bed, which had not been slept in, by a rough washing stand and by a chest of maple drawers, surmounted by countless ornate photograph frames and by a bright-blue plaster Virgin. The window was so close to the wall of the adjacent house that only a pallid light reached the interior. Olive seated herself at the edge of the bed and motioned Father Ames to the chair. As she tried to collect herself, in her sudden confrontation of him, she strove to fasten her attention on the significance of the little statue rather than on its strident colour and not to notice that behind its head there hung a brilliantly yellow calendar, representing a goddess of liberty who advertised some brand of beer.

Her words in the corridor had broken from her in her haste; but she saw, with a sudden astonishment, as her look finally rested on him, that her question had been relevant. He scarcely knew her. His face was still absorbed and absent and his eyes clear with a mystery of initiation. Olive's glance of furtive wonder deepened to a stare of astonishment. For the first time an approximation of the elements of his strength entered her mind. She felt in herself some dim sense of what his sensitiveness must mean in a life perpetually

controlled, and of his passionate participation in all the acts of living.

He turned to her with an evident difficulty.

"You say you came here to find me? There's nothing wrong, I hope—no? You must try to understand, Mrs. Devon. I know it must be difficult for anyone who believes as little as you believe. But I've just seen a woman die; an ignorant creature, clinging to life and to her children and her husband, and yet sustained by that incalculable miracle of the faith. No matter how long I live, it's a thing I shall never see without an immeasurable humility and gratitude to God, Who, when everything else is stripped from us, gives us that. And now—you say you want to see me?"

Olive's breath quickened. "Yes, Father."

"For what reason? Yesterday afternoon, I remember"—he seemed to readjust his mind to the stringencies of her case—"you were very much adrift; you were deeply unhappy."

She had a sudden sense of the abandonment of her resistance. "Yes; but I'm past unhappiness now;" she slipped to her knees before him; "I'm broken, Father. I came to tell you that I've surrendered, that I'm ready to become a Catholic."

"Ah!" said Father Ames quickly. She felt, with her averted eyes, the swift intensity of his look. Above her inclined head she was conscious that he signed her with the cross and blessed her. She waited; it had half occurred to her that he would stretch out his hand to help her rise; but when, after a moment or two of hesitation, she straightened herself and resumed her seat on the bed, what instantly struck her was the

change in his attitude to an assertiveness completely strange to her.

"You must be very grateful," he said instantly. "You must realise the great privilege which has come to you. When did you feel in yourself the capacity to take this step?"

"Oh, I've felt it for weeks, Father; you must know; only since yesterday, it's been inevitable and irresistible. And you will help me—you will guide me?"

He pursued the trend of his thought. "Yes—it has been, I think, inevitable. And we can only feel the profoundest appreciation of the mercies of God. You are sure?" His glance fixed her fully. "This really reaches your inner self? You really are, as it's called, converted?"

"Yes,"—she drew a deepened breath—"I'm really sure."

"It will not, you know, be an easy way. Ah, you won't have the small frictions which come to most converts, for John's generosity is perfect. But you'll naturally have to hold on to new things and cancel old ones; and that may perhaps mean a struggle with yourself. You're ready for that? It's much harder, you see"—his smile just touched his lips—"to be faithful to an affirmation than to a negation, to a belief than to a disbelief—to a faith than to one's self!"

"Yes, Father; I can do anything, if you'll teach me."

"We must see about your instruction at once. There's Father Norton, at the Paulists—a man of tact and penetration, and accustomed to the care of young Catholics . . ." he glanced at his watch. "I must go back to these poor people; and you, my child, must go around to the Church, to the eight o'clock mass.

ASCENT

Later in the day I shall send you a word of counsel, —probably by Father Norton, if he's free. I'll find a chance to speak to him."

"But can't I have my first instruction"—she hesitated now—"from you?" Her eyes clung to his. "After all, Father, whether you grant it or not, it's you to whom I owe it all."

"You owe it all, as you put it," said Father Ames easily, "to God. Ah, Mrs. Devon, you have now indeed everything in the world. And what you'll have to construct with——!"

She bent her head, without speaking, and Father Ames rose.

"Your life until now has been accidental; it has lacked the ritual of a purpose. But now you will understand. You will measure even the simple facts like those"—he pointed—"in the next room there; and they take the widest of comprehension."

"Yes, Father, I know."

"I need not assure you that I am unutterably thankful and infinitely rejoiced;" he half turned to the door; "yes, later in the day I shall send you a word of advice. Put all your confidence in Father Norton and tell him all your difficulties. He can solve them for you"—he arrested her interruption—"no, a thousand times better than I. I, you see, have no experience with the soul which has had the privilege of your illumination, and he has."

"But I need you; I need the things only you can give me!" Her words broke out before she could shape them to anything better.

"You need something far beyond my gift to give; all I am worthy to offer is my prayers, and those are

yours. No—remember! Your actions now”—she had risen and they confronted each other, in the dim light—“are the immediate symbols of your soul,—since you admit you have a soul! There’s the closest sort of continuity between the two. Where before you’ve done what you pleased, it’s been because there’s been no true development in you, but only your instinct to control you. Now all that is changed. Remember that in everything you say and do. Your life must be an effort to manifest your faith. And”—he touched her hand lightly—“be worthy of it.”

In the pressure of her feeling and under the burden of her fatigue, the little room for a moment swam around her. All she could definitely outline in her mind was a vagrant recollection, which persisted in wandering through her tossed thoughts, of her grandfather’s habitual definition of the distorted susceptibilities of enthusiasts.

The energy in Father Ames’s voice strengthened.

“I can only repeat that my thankfulness has no bounds. It has seemed to me too sad, you know,” his smile now had a peculiar beneficence, “that a person so extraordinary as you should be so little great!”

Olive’s head lifted, with a touch of her habitual defiance. “And now you expect so much of me?”

“Everything!” he said briefly. He bent to pick up his breviary, and a second later he passed out of the door. She hesitated. The weariness singing in her ears warned her that she had better go. A sense of the relaxation of achievement and arrival penetrated her. There was a stir down the hallway, and she could hear a clatter in the kitchen which meant the preparation

ASCENT

of breakfast. A drifting odour of stale cabbage came through the open window, and she raised her handkerchief to her nose; yet before she turned she looked once more around her, with the instinct that she must impress on her mind the setting of so contradictory a scene.

FATHER AMES'S telephone message had come to Devon while he was at dinner. He had heard it without a definite surprise, except at the fact that his own vague presentiment had been fulfilled. When, at the end of June, Ames had suddenly been called to Michigan, Devon had bade him good-bye with his habitual impression that he was under the direction of orders whose untraceable requirements of so highly delicate a mind must always inspire a sense of too summary an authority laid upon too fine an instrument. He happened to see him off, on this occasion, from the station, and in the jostle of the crowd he had said as much to him; and he remembered vividly the amused significance of the look with which Ames had replied.

"You see only a police method, don't you? The imposition of a system of morality? And what is the use of any life without a system of morality, I'd like to know? What's the use of a morality, without a system? What good is even your morality, good as it is, without one? Just as any fact is useless in itself, unless it's been tempered and composed by thought, so your goodness, my dear John, needs a code. You have a magnificent morality, but no God." The sharply drawn lines of his face had accentuated themselves. "But there it is! *Je n'ai pas su me simplifier*—and you have! You are wonderful, you know, and I'm always your devoted friend!" . . .

He had disappeared in the press of people, leaving

Devon with the clearest impression he had ever had of all that underlay not only his omissions but his complete negation of even a past, in the completeness of his negation of any personal existence. Devon had guessed, years before, that the extreme compression of all his force into one dedication of activity was no less than the modelling of his actual being; that where most men denied and repressed, he had long since struck not at the manifestation but the root, and that clear as his action was, his inner action had the clarity of a perfection. But in the light implications of his face, Devon had seemed suddenly to see a door stand ajar and to have a rapid flash of vision of the world beyond it. He felt the vague presence of the drama in a life without drama and the stir of accidents, not of human derivation—and heaven knew, he thought, Ames's sympathy struck to the fibres of human questions—but of the deeper workings of an inner mind. So ceaseless a search for the manifestations of a God seemed to him, suddenly, the most poignant feeling, as actual feeling, that his imagination could picture; and as he turned out of the pushing crowd in the station, he had thought of nothing so much as of St. Augustine's words, "Where there shineth unto my soul a light which space cannot contain" . . .

His suspicion of some change in this world in which only the great changes were important had made him half await a sudden turn in Ames's action, during the summer months. The message just brought to him had said that Father Ames had unexpectedly reached New York that same afternoon, because of an unforeseen alteration in his movements. Could Devon go to his rooms that evening, after dinner? and would he make,

to this end, every effort, since the extreme uncertainty of Ames's plans made it, for the moment, his last positively free time?

The words, even as they were transmitted through a servant, had an odd touch of finality; and sinking back in his chair, with his scarcely touched dinner before him, Devon had let his speculation people the hot, empty room, whose windows stood open to the oppressive September night. It had instantly surprised him that Ames should not have offered to come to him, to the cool little library where he had so often written in the spring and whose privacy he knew; yet had he, after all, not somewhat evaded that hospitality and been with them less frequently in the days immediately preceding his departure for the west? Devon tried to reconsider it. But the thought merged too instantly in a closer thought; and while he poured out his coffee and lit his cigar, his mind slipped back into its constant preoccupation.

From the moment Olive had told him of her impending motherhood, he had been aware that a change in values had come to his universe. If he had always more or less and inevitably expected such a sentiment to touch him deeply, he was none the less surprised at the strength in its vivacity. He found that his hopes for a child had gathered some of the force of the sense of frustration which had run through the satiric days of his boyhood. They had never perhaps assumed a particular definiteness, but he had none the less had a constant consciousness that there was to be some award, in the eventualities of chance, for the suppression of his capacities of affection. He didn't know, and still less cared, how most men felt

about it; but when his wish had become actuality, what he had first thought of, as a matter of fact, was not so much that his future had suddenly extended in a new commitment, but that the child would bear in itself so much of Olive. His constant sense of being bound, in his feeling for her, to something ultimate had never been so strong as when he found that it pervaded the possibilities of this new relation.

The suddenly different element in their future had already woven differences into their tie. Devon vividly remembered when she had told him of its imminence; not in the current way, with either emotion or with regret, and with no more revolt at her already persistent discomfort than with what she called a sentimental exaggeration of the situation. "I haven't the classic attitude, I know," she had said, with her dryest conciseness,—“and I suppose you expect me to have! I am sure it will be a great experience and I am equally sure it will interest and instruct me; and that's what I'm out for, you know! It appears a woman's not alive, physically or mentally, unless she's had a child. I've never yet been afraid of difficulties, and I'm not afraid of them now. I'm far more oppressed by the terrible triteness of view about it. I've had a wonderful letter from father. Do you know what it most resembles?—the letter I've also had from your mother! She's so overflowing with the poetry of it that she's almost cut short her cure in the south. Fate is delicious—to have suddenly made those two alike; and I assure you that, except for the variations of their note paper, their banality's undistinguishable! But you, John—” she had abruptly broken off and waited for his reply, with an attention rare in her.

ASCENT

Devon had smiled. "Are you expecting of me the same banality? Well, you'll get it. Motherhood's a marvel and a miracle."

"And you've so wanted a child?"

"Yes, of course I have."

"Yet there's something more?"

He had laid his hands, without speaking, on her shoulders. The measure of his feeling was his fear to risk it in words. He couldn't have her analyse it anew. The immense fact that her youth, in its aggressive independence, was subjected to an inexorable law, had unnerved him more than the thought of its fruition. The tissue of gentleness which enclosed her in his thought seemed to him to wrap her round like veils of light, to lay every beat of his separate vitality under her feet and to reflect every motion of her hands in a correspondent stir in his blood.

His feeling had only been enriched by this silence, and his silence had deepened as each week of the summer passed. He saw her always, now, as his vision of her since June had perpetually shaped itself—lying inertly on her sofa, with her eyes darker than ever and her face grey. Whether he sat beside her or read to her through a sleepless night or helped her nurse or her maid in some small ministration for her comfort, the tightening of his apprehension was the same. He seemed to himself to have brought her face to face with an actuality which she could not deny, in spite of the high-handed attitude with which she accepted it. Whatever her revolt or her resistance had been, it was pent up behind her constantly compressed lips. He stared before him, across the bare table at which, for almost four months, he had had his silent meals,

with the lights striking in through the opened windows from the noisy night which had none of the mystery of darkness. Her touch on the chords of his sensibility had never seemed closer; and he asked himself, with a sudden access of curiosity, what the miracle of feeling after all was. Why was it the best chance life could hold, that one should so penetrate and be penetrated; that one should be dedicated to a slavery, to the sacrifice of one's closest privacies to the action of another entity? What was it that made the miracle, that struck a cry out of silence, that measured the moments and cancelled the hours, and broke one while it saved one? and did it in reality exist, apart from his unbelievable sensitiveness to it? He saw his hands clasped on the table in front of him, and he recalled himself, with his touch of dry amusement at his own exaggeration, and rose. Yet he caught himself telling the servant who opened the door for him to say to Olive's maid that he was going out for an hour or two and shouldn't see her again that night. He could not shake off the impression that, at the moment, his committal to her, in some inexplicable way, transcended his need of her actual presence.

The sudden turn of Father Ames's head, away from his desk and over his shoulder, and his sharp movement, as he rose, gave Devon an instant sense that there was an even more definite purpose than he divined, behind the summons he had received.

"My dear John!—" he held Devon's arm closely; "but why should I thank you for coming? Aren't you always a little beyond my thanks? There—can you be comfortable? Heavens, what heat! And the

noise, and the dust!" He drew forward a chair to the open window nearest the writing table. "You've a cigar to console you? and you won't mind just this one light? There are still mosquitoes, I see; I'd never expected to see the worst of the climate in September . . . !"

Devon nodded. Looking behind him into the darkened room, he was struck by the sense of a change in it. Its shadows had curiously disappeared. It was pervaded by a certain hardness, and all he could be sure of defining were the letters sorted on the desk and the pile of books on the centre table. As he turned back to Ames, he had the odd notion that in his face, too, there was a sudden lack of shadows. The determined openness of his look reminded Devon of nothing so much as the exposure of some delicate surface to the harshest light, and his mouth was set in its firmest lines.

"You look," Devon put it with his habitual brevity, "as if you've had rather a pull of it, out in Michigan."

Father Ames laughed. "My dear fellow, the places I've been would be shocked to think they weren't all of life, but—alas!—they aren't! It takes more than three mad months of hurry and heat to undermine one, you know; though I admit it's had its share! The crowds, my dear John, and the crowded minds, without a trace of population! They're so kind, and so colossally childish. I've seen everything, from nuns who ought to have been running department stores, to millionaires who believed in their mission to reform China."

"It's been another experience, then?"

"I put my experiences, you know," his smile glanced across his face, "as lessons. It's been a lesson, yes, added to all the other lessons. It's over, I'm thankful to say, it's done; now I'm on the threshold of the next thing."

Devon smiled, in his turn. "Are you ever away from that threshold?"

"By my vows and my calling—no." His familiar impatience, which, as Devon reflected, was characteristically with himself, just gleamed. "Yet isn't that law almost too difficult a one which expects some of us to be in perpetual aggression—which takes us from the inner thresholds so that we may always stand ready at the outer? You see, there's where the world really divides us, you and me, just as men! I'm pledged to be constantly exposing my deepest processes, I'm committed to live this tenuous, invisible thing called faith; and you . . ."

Devon's rare colour had slowly risen. It had needed no more than Father Ames's tone to place their talk on terms more personal than any which they had yet touched. Often enough, at Oxford, they had discussed the metaphysics of belief, Ames always with an even more open vocabulary of treatment than his companion, since he had the easy fluency of his impersonality. But Devon's imagination had at once divined that to-night he was not an instance of his obedience to his hierarchy nor a symbol of renunciation, but an individual whose private thought was for the hour open. His own reserve softened as he took up the broken phrase, with an impulse whose extent he scarcely realised until he had pronounced the words.

"Well, I'm committed, too; only you're committed

to a faith in a deity, and I'm committed to a faith in a personality!"

Father Ames's question was instant. "You mean your wife?"

Devon's reticence seemed for a second to reclaim him; then he pursued. "Sometimes when you talk of one's need of a God, and all that, I wonder no less than you must have wondered, what this insistent need of faith is—above all, what it is for those of us who don't see any one moral principle, like God, and who yet have an absolute need to cling to something outside themselves, which they can slave for and serve." He struck the ash from his cigar. "Don't misunderstand me! I've no illusions about my situation—that it's exalted or flawless, or even, as situations go, extraordinary. You used the word committed. There it is!" He rose abruptly and stared for a moment out of the window, with his eyes set on the effulgent city and the stars which had, in the softness of a damp night, some of the tremulousness of golden flowers. As he turned back he had again a faint smile. "Whatever you'd call my faith, I'm bound to it, and I've passed my final threshold."

Father Ames's silence seemed to prolong and deepen the silence which had lain between each of Devon's words. His eyes, at first, had a flash of gratitude. His sensitiveness, always more composed and expressed than Devon's, had evidently seen more clearly than Devon himself this first direct sacrifice of their reserves and had apprehended it as a generosity that Devon made it. But his look, raised as it was, stiffened after a moment or two in the lines of a resolve.

"Well, my dear fellow, and I've passed mine." He

shook his head. "No, I hadn't already passed it when I became a priest! And I've been that, in soul and in heart, ever since I had a mind to think with. This is different. It's the end of my road, the termination of my service, and the last move of my soul. I asked you to come to-night to tell you that I'd to-day written to my Bishop and to the Superior, and that on my return to England—and that's to be immediate—I enter the Carmelites."

Devon had moved from the window with the slowness which he always opposed to Father Ames's rapidity of gesture. His hand fell on Ames's shoulder and he stood, for an instant, looking down at him before he dropped into his chair.

"It's so blessedly like you, John, to say nothing when everyone else has said—and will say—so desperately much! But what is there to say, when one's passed beyond reasons and arguments, claims and obligations? For months—or perhaps for years—it's been in me; now, I'm clear. The tumult's done with. I've had hot opposition and cold opposition; from my brother the Archbishop, even from Rome. But when you're sure as I'm sure—" He let his look close his sentence.

"We shall never see you, I suppose?" Devon put his question cursorily.

"In the ordinary course of things, never. Oh, in the extraordinary circumstance, perhaps; but what one is after all vowed to is one's perpetuity, to a consecration of one's every thought to travelling that road we call prayer, which stretches between man and the ultimate sources of his strength."

Devon smiled. "Well, you won't change! You'll

pray as well, as fervently and as brilliantly, as you've lectured and written; and what right has one, after all, to say you're wrong?" His eyes again shifted. "Only one doesn't much like such partings!"

"No,—I know! That, you now see, was the reason I sent for you." Father Ames paused. "That, and something more." He raised his head, so that his face met the light more clearly. "I wanted to tell you, too, just how much, in my decision, I indirectly owe to your wife."

Devon turned in his chair. "To Olive?" he repeated.

"I should like you to understand," Father Ames continued, with his sharp incision, "because you're the only person I know fine enough to understand what has been so tortuous a situation. You know what my life has been . . . the rush and the tear of it, the chances I've had to serve—and which I've so badly used—the constant play of mind in which I've had to exist. It was my duty to fight along as I did; that's obvious. But it was a situation every inch of which was a pitfall. There was every conceivable danger in my path; too superficial a grip, too easy conquests, too rapid thought. Because people so readily listened to me, the risk was that I shouldn't test myself. Because I was told to do the spectacular thing, the risk was that I'd forget the foundations of it. It was all very amazing. When I was twenty my superiors told me I had these weapons to use, and I ceased to exist except in their use. That you know!"

He spoke more rapidly than usual, but Devon instinctively felt that his words had never, before his

most critical audiences, been more actually expressive of what was in his mind.

"In other words, it just so happened that when your wife crossed my path—amongst all the other people who crossed my path—she called into a special play in me the methods of attack I'd been developing all these years. I'd used them enough, heaven knows, with this problem or with that, and sometimes with a convert; but she needed them all, and all at once. The very ease with which I dealt with her was a revelation to me that my ease was too sure. Just because one needs the best of one's brain, with her, she was a constant illustration to me of how far along the road I'd travelled. I did it well, John—but I did it too well! It's a thing holier men than I have done with half my education and training; and I began to say to myself—what after all is this life, so much of the technique of which I've mastered and the mystery of which I never touch?"

He drew his brows together. "Don't misinterpret what I say. Your wife herself had her part in it; it wasn't only a case of intellectual reaction. It wasn't only the illustration of her needs but the illustration of her personality, which was perfect in its use as a lesson for me. You know—I told you at the time she was received into the Church—how careful I had been not to influence her unduly; but I'd had to see her let me influence her unduly, whether I would or no. She was incredibly rapid in her reaction, and incredibly adrift; and there wasn't an occasion when I hadn't to keep her turned to the real issues . . ."

Devon laid his hand, for a quick instant, on the hand with which Ames still grasped his arm.

"Well, there it was. It's a great battle, the battle for a soul or the battle for an idea; and one's the other made human. But it happened to be the symbolism of your wife's struggle which showed me I was done with it. Oh, I shall miss it; it was wonderfully stimulating to fight for an imposition, or a definition, or a moral, as I fought. Only, for the time that's left me, I must learn to pray!"

Devon still maintained his silence, as if all his thought were turning to and fro between Father Ames's sentences, with the quantity of their implications and the bare simplicity of their conclusions. He had the persistent sense, in the back of his mind, that nothing had ever mattered to him more than this impending relegation of a living person to inanition. He pulled himself together, with an abrupt effort, as Ames again spoke, with his voice charged now with a different energy.

"And now, my dear fellow, before I'm off, is there nothing I can do for you, or for Mrs. Devon either? Your child—it's to be born in the winter?"

Devon could feel the effort of the reversion of his attention, as if he resumed again a physical burden. "Yes—February. Olive's been very poorly, you know; perhaps she's written you? No? Well, she is a dumb creature when she's in pain, and she's been dumb enough, since spring. I'd hoped that perhaps you . . ."

"Ah, she'll have better guidance than I could ever have given her. Father Norton, of the Paulists, has been her director, hasn't he?"

"Yes; yet since she was received into the Church, in July, she's seemed to me to get from him extraordinarily little. Oh, it's not been his fault; that's ob-

vious. I know he's come often, since she wasn't well enough to do anything but drive; but he's frequently talked more to me than to her. At first she seemed eager to see him—just at the time, you know, of your leaving . . .” He broke off. “You understand Olive well, because your imagination touches her. You mustn't blame Father Norton; in a sense, you mustn't blame her. She's inherited from her extraordinary old grandfather that she's always caustic to the person to whom she's too much accustomed. There you are!”

Father Ames thought for a second. “And the Church itself—the thing that's all of Father Norton, or me, or any of us? Hasn't she appeared to grow in her faith? No, John—it's seemed to me, frankly speaking, of a rare beauty that her belief in God should come to her just as she was about to be a mother; that in the construction of her child she is also constructing a great spiritual apprehension. . . .” He stopped, with his eyes on Devon's smile. Its sophistication seemed to hold for a moment all his thought. “Ah, but it is you who know everything about it all, and I who know nothing!”

Devon did not reply. The quality of initiation in his face deepened and something of the pressure of the past months touched his features. His habitual inexpressiveness could not cloak it, and for the space of a moment or two, he was conscious that Father Ames must be seeing the visible exposition of the clash of the forces of his feeling with the difficult terms of living.

“Don't you see,” he searched for the word, “that Olive's not yet real?”

Father Ames's face lit with animation. “Then the

Church will create her—you'll see!" and as Devon mutely shook his head, he took up the negation. "No, you think not? But—my dear boy, forgive me—no feeling will save her!"

"No; she's not a woman to be saved by feeling. All I know," his shoulders rose and fell, "is my instinct to hold on."

"You're wonderful—no, not you, but your generosity! Haven't I always said it?" He rose, with his hand on Devon's shoulder. "Leave her to God. He chooses the most unrecognisable ways . . . I shall be praying for you both. Tell her so, from me, will you? And now it's nearly eleven, and at midnight my train leaves. I go, you see, to Montreal and take a boat there to-morrow. . . ."

Devon slowly pushed back his chair. His pause seemed again to measure the facts. "And shan't one ever hear of you—or from you?"

"Oh, I'll have information larger than any human information!" His accent, Devon could have fancied, was compounded to make the moment pass easily. "I shan't hear of your ups and down, or your goings and comings; but I shall know, as I believe, the great facts about your welfare, either here or in another world. And I shall always remember our good talks at Oxford, and all our controversies . . . So many things as I shall have to remember!"

Devon's glance, under the sense of his impending departure, had turned away. He looked around the obscure room, and for the first time realised the extent of its nudity. "And all your things—what you used to call your treasures?" He was half astonished at the relevance his question seemed to have to the moment.

Father Ames's look followed his, as if he saw in the stripped walls his own sense of their significance. "They and I have parted; I and all outward symbols have parted—you see? It's been a strange fate, you know! I've stood on a little oasis, beyond human beings, and watched them commit the follies and magnificences of existence. I've lectured them while they've lived and recommended them to God when they've died." His eyes again met Devon's. "But there's no one for whose happiness I more ardently pray than yours! That you know!"

Devon caught his hand, and a moment later he had closed the door.

XVI

AS Devon stood in the silence of his hall, just at midnight, all that peopled the stillness seemed to drop like a weight on the tense cords of his nerves and to hold him motionless.

It was as he paused for a second, to switch off the electric light, that Olive's voice had suddenly sounded, from her room. It carried its habitual accent of impatience; but coming out of the dark, at this hour and when all the house was asleep, it conveyed to him a touch of her mystery and stirred his constant sense of an inexplicable quality in her, which shaded her like the wings of a fate. His balance, he supposed, was displaced by his talk with Father Ames and their parting. The wrench was intimate to him, and its circumstances had appealed not only to his feeling but to the innate respect he bore to a cause. The brevity of their words, he realised, had been the measure of all they held; and the impending immolation of so vital a mind and the artificial relegation of it to such a sterility, gripped his thought and tossed through it traceless uncertainties. What would he himself have done—he wondered for a second, with his foot on the stairs—signed to a great idea and the servant of such a belief? What would have been the corresponding enrichment? And all his fertility of feeling was wrapped, as it was, about the resonances of a voice. He knew that like most

of his countrymen, with no elaborations in the refinements of sense, he was capable of putting his ardour only into a personal emotion for a woman. Beside Ames's, his seemed to him suddenly a tracked, mapped world, without winds or stars.

Olive was raised in her bed, as he turned from the darkness of the hall into the darkness of her room. He could hear her quick movement of expectation and the sudden drop, as she realised his presence, of her shoulders against the pillows. She had shut out every possible ray of light, and the room had an opaque blackness which was as stifling as its lack of air. The night was still so warm that it was difficult to breathe; but when he moved towards the window she arrested him.

"No, I want it this way. If you open the curtains, the light from the street will come in, and I shall see. It's that, that I can't manage—to see. . . ." Her voice had for a second the sharpness of overstrained feeling. "Well! And you've been out, walking like a free being through the streets, without the sense that all your life was contorted and changed into a servitude. I suppose I once did that, too; only it seems so long ago."

He knew well enough these signs of too great a tension in her, and he tried for a second to deflect her mind. She must be suffocated, he said, in this airless dark; and had her nurse left a glass of milk on the table within her reach, and had she taken her bouillon at nine? But she cut him off peremptorily, with a weariness which was more piercing than her irritation.

"Oh, I've everything—everything. I'm fed and cared for. I'm even at last commanding some of

the experience I've longed for. At least, John, do me that justice! I'm like grandfather—I storm, but I don't complain!"

Devon had raised her hand and laid it against his face, as if his comprehension transcended any definition of its depths, and he could feel, in her thin fingers, the tremor which lay beneath her silence. With his words with Father Ames dominating his mind, her isolation and exclusion had never appeared to him so complete. He felt the poignancy of the coarseness—he faced the word—of the contradictions in her, the perfect brutality of her egoism, and yet the streak of something large which always saved it from condemnation. It seemed to him for an instant symbolised by the crucifix whose outlines he could just discern, and which she placed, without a thought, amongst the powder boxes and scent bottles on her dressing-table.

The strain of his reflections made her immeasurably alien and yet intimately close, for a moment; then he spoke. "Soon, my dear, you'll be well and free again."

Olive laughed in a deeper tone than her usual short one. "Don't you see that's just the misery of it? Of course I shall be well and as free as the wind—freer than any mother, since I'll outgrow my baby in a month or two. Oh, have no illusions about it! I know my freedom is a hideous thing."

Devon searched for something with which to meet her hard lucidity. "But can't you perpetuate yourself, in this way—in your child—as nothing else can ever perpetuate you?"

He could almost feel, through the obscurity, her stare of wonder; and he instinctively caught up her protest.

ASCENT

"I've no illusions either, remember. I see farther than your incapacities—to your capacities . . ."

Her hand for an instant touched his cheek, with a responsive pressure. "Do you never wonder what the return of my freedom—of my bodily activity—is going to make you pay? The future's a strange thing; and for all of it you've linked yourself up to my fate, whatever it is, when you ought to have married a woman who would have thought only of you, and I ought to have married a man who would have ignored me. . . ." He could hear her head shift against her pillow, and she drew a long breath. "It's terrible to think, John, that all your life has to be determined by my moods; by what you call my growth, but by what is in reality only new forms of my wretched restlessness!"

For a moment again Devon did not speak. Nothing had ever seemed to him sadder than this imprint of her nascent experience and her sense of her own limitations and penalties. He bent over her on the bed. In the dark all he felt was the warm braid of her hair; he lifted it to his lips, and in its touch against them he felt that he touched the intimacies of her thought.

"My dearest child, I've some news for you—news which it's only a happiness to tell you, for when you let me see a little way into you, Olive, I'm surer than ever of your comprehension. To-night I went to see Ames. I've got so many messages for you from him—messages that are too deep for the term messages . . ."

He heard her turn towards him, with a slowness which marked her concentration. "Yes?"

"But the main point's brief enough. He's leaving to-night, by the midnight train, for Canada."

ASCENT

"I thought he was to be here all autumn and all winter, to lecture; is that plan changed?"

As she moved her hair had fallen from his hands; and her withdrawal into the obscurity which so separated them seemed to Devon to break the current of the exchange of feeling between them.

"Every plan has changed." He responded with his tone unconsciously altered. "He's sailing to-morrow. He goes directly to his brother, the Archbishop, in London, and from there he goes to Farnborough."

"To Farnborough . . . But why!" she exclaimed.

"It's unthinkable to us both, but as he himself says, it's completed. He's decided to enter the order of the Carmelites; and you know what that means. We've got to face it that Ames, as we've known him, is lost to us."

She was silent for so prolonged a moment that Devon could almost count the pulses of his expectancy. In the tension of his relation to her, he had never felt so clearly the storm of the unassuaged forces in her or their beat against all his own presuppositions. The inadequacy of his knowledge of her reactions seemed to numb his mind and leave his thought inert. If only he could foresee, he caught himself wishing, what she would feel, he could help her; but what was the use of any effort in this separation?

He felt her hand clutch his arm, and she suddenly sat up and bent forward. "What time is it?" she asked. "Strike a match and see . . ."

He laid his hand on hers. "It's no use, my dear. His train's gone. I heard the clock chime the quarter after midnight as I came upstairs."

She dropped back. He could hear her quickened breath, and his sympathy rose in a tide.

"Oh, Olive, you must understand it better than I—you who are of his own faith. But, my dear, to you it's so far greater a grief than to me! It's you to whom he taught the greatest things, the things that make us live and die . . ."

She broke out with an impetuosity which swept his words aside. "Oh, don't, don't, don't! As if I care for what he taught me—for what's only theoretic and dead! What I need is himself, his personality, his mind, his knowledge. When I think what our relation was—of the amazing adjustment between us, of the magnificent stimulant I was to him and he to me—when I think of what we might have experienced together,—no, it's too miserable, it's too stupid!"

Devon rose; he was aware of the carved end of the bed, under his hand, and the lighter oblong of the door leading to the hall, opposite him. He heard her continue to murmur to herself, with every now and then the broken interruption of a sob; but her grief was incapable of attenuating the hard outlines of the image of her which hung before him in the dark. For a second his impulse to leave her was so pressing that he fought with it. Some intimation rose in his mind that he could never cease to see her as she had, in her few words, drawn herself.

He turned back to the bed, and spoke in a voice which struck him as no less forced and artificial than his words.

"You've got your glass of milk, you say, and your bell is under your pillow? Very well, then; good-night."

He was conscious that she twisted towards him and raised her head, as if she were trying to see him.

"You know, John, that when all is said and done, you detest me!"

His ceaseless preoccupation with the special consideration due her relaxed its stricture for a moment, and he wheeled about sharply.

"There are things in you which I detest—yes."

They waited for an instant. "Let me go, then!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I'm not the sort of woman who would sentimentalise about it, or about leaving you at such a time—before my child's born. I've something of those bare Ware hills in me, I suppose; haven't we all in us the stamp of what we most hate? I shouldn't be frightened by the conventionalities of failure. I'll never make you anything but miserable. I offend everything in you. No, no,—it's hopeless!"

"Sometimes, I admit," Devon spoke slowly, "it seems to me hopeless enough that I should ever reach you. I've caught myself, lately, not looking ahead. Don't think I trick myself. All I do with my life is to knock my brain against the problem of what's to become of you."

The touch of defiance with which she always instinctively spoke of herself tinged her voice. "Even grandfather, who wasn't given to hysteria, said there was nothing to save me!"

Devon did not reply. Perhaps, he thought, the profundity of her own scepticism had communicated itself to him. His thoughts turned suddenly back to Ames's capacity to sacrifice all his participation for the unseen and for the single reality which could never be proven. Something in him had been touched and

aged; during the last weeks, and to-night, he was conscious of it. He would go on with the same persistency, he knew, the same dependence on his feeling for her and the same complete devotion, but with no belief. He did not deny that he would always be driven and dominated by it, and that his sense of obligation to it was, as far as human immutability went, immutable. But its miracle, he saw, would be performed in him alone. The isolation inherent in all dedication had never struck him before. He drew the covers around her shoulders without any further word, and felt his way across the hall to his room.

XVII

IN the still light of the September afternoon, the curled golden leaves of the chestnut trees drifted noiselessly down from the interlaced branches, through the luminance of the autumn air. Their fall had the long motion of time. Hasteless and sure, there was some grace in its inevitability which caught Olive's eyes and lifted them. Not the least of her amazements, since she had touched the mystery which enwraps Paris like a pale veil of mauve and blue, had been this sense of the sudden implications which it resumed. The very drop of a leaf, the fall of the light, the stir of the alleys of the Luxembourg, so full of the vitality of Parisian life and so far fuller of the deep silences of history, cast her thought back to the flow of time and to the drama of significance in the poetry of an enriched age.

In the last days, she had caught her breath enough, free from the first pressure of the excitement of arrival, to measure how deep her wonder was. All the technical differences of a new civilisation had diverted her at first. It had been marvellous to trace the outline of the cliffs and the quaintness of the harbour, when they landed, to see gestures so free and hear voices so pitched to other shadings. All the arid recollections of her childhood contributed to her surprise. But she had brushed them by, with as easy a rapidity as she traversed her first days. She had exclaimed to Devon, when they first stood in the Louvre and watched their first sunset

stream magnificently along the Champs Elysées, that, astonished as she was, it was above all wonderful that she was to be more astonished to-morrow; and he had turned over his shoulder to her to say, with his eyes full of amusement, that he never could get over the easy familiarity of her terms with astonishment. The rapidity of her impressions, indeed, struck him no less than her adaptability to them. She fell into them as easily as she fell into French, and with a competence as unailing as the competence she showed in accustoming herself to French meanings, in engaging her servants and in directing the details of their installation.

Devon had secured a sublease of a little apartment in the rue Pierre Charron which, as Olive said when she first looked about the single salon, was exactly on the scale of what her initiation was at present worth. She would be absurd, she said, in rooms too old; there was too little which was ripe about her. Here, with the few pieces of good furniture, the highly waxed brown floors and the blue and buff hangings of old Jouy, they would at least be separate from the outer habits of tourists. Her flash of wisdom struck Devon most, as she saw, in its consistency. She might take to it all like a duck to water, and with all the American fluency, she assured him; but she knew what she could not do. By the terms of her nature she was condemned to be in perpetual motion. She was even condemned—she had put it with her sardonic touch—to be herself the poorest kind of tourist, who had such a thirst for seeing that she never saw deeper than the outer aspect.

She was constantly remembering, from the farthest days at Ware, old Lacy's amusement at what he called

his incapacity to travel. When he was young, or younger, and before the collapse of his resources, it appeared that he had made the tour of Europe then consecrated by custom; and he had never after ceased to comment with pride on his refusal, as he put it, to displace himself. "I was made to criticise, not to absorb," he had been fond of saying; "I am not French, my dear, no, no, no; my emotions are far too complex and my appreciations too simple. But I don't have, thank God, any real participation. Intellectually I am just local—nothing more—and not like Goethe who, as Mme. de Staël so delightfully says, made himself a pagan for the purpose of penetrating antiquity. You're probably more like me, pussy, than you are like Goethe. Since you're a woman you'll be sacrificed to a woman's plasticity, but in reality you'll be just little Olive Lacy. Think it as extraordinary as it really is, but don't be fooled by it, my dear—don't be fooled!"

As long before as when their leaving America had been determined, she had had a constant and vivid vision of the same steady regard which had pierced all the mists of her childhood, watching her with a new element of appraisal. Her grandfather's quick touch had lain more than ever on her remembrance, as if his vigil over her had never been more close and critical. She had recovered from the birth of her little daughter, in the February before, with a difficulty which her doctors could not explain. For weeks her physical lassitude had dominated her and all her energy seemed dispersed in the monotony of her pain. Her delicacy of constitution had never been more apparent; and Devon had admitted to her that she herself came

closest to an understanding of it when she said, with a smile just touching her pallor, that her bodily conditions would always be determined by what was in her mind, and that just now she had no enthusiasm to tonic her. Her interest rose at moments, and even her suffering would pale in her attempt to define it. But whatever other women might get out of the experience she had traversed, she said that she had finished with it. What made her baby most real to her, as she frankly assured Devon and Father Norton, was the imposition inherent in the law of reproduction and the unfair demand on her vitality. Her comments had never had a sharper thrust of truth nor had her honesty ever been barer; and she did not attempt to deny that what she felt for the child was a residue of feeling, something come to fruition long after the impulse which created it had permanently vanished.

She had wondered if Father Norton, as he listened to her, had ever applied the same terms to her relation with her faith. She never talked to him nor received his instruction without asking herself if her sense of Father Ames's absence did not make her replies too caustic and her responses too dry. When she was again able to resume her religious duties, she performed them with a sudden eagerness. To grow in familiarity with their ritual meant an echo of the ritual of Ames's thought, and she had seemed at times to recapture an actual sense of him and of a present and unseen bond with his consciousness. Frequently, when she heard mass, she caught herself fixed in a concentration of remembrance, suddenly separate from her surroundings, and his presence, in what had been the moment of the greatest consecration of all his adher-

ence, was a reality to her. She fell into the ways and attitudes of mind she conceived he would have expected of her with the same rapid adaptability with which she genuflected and crossed herself. But as her memory of him thinned, under the friction of her impatience, her adherence to his habits thinned. She had no instinctive reliance on any of the outer forms of the faith, and the impulse which had made her assume them seemed to her so lightly rooted that she wished, at times, that Father Norton would relax a vigilance which was beginning to irk her.

The return of her physical resistance, when it came, had taken the form of a sharp recrudescence of her will. During the long months of her convalescence her determination had had countless hours in which to clarify itself. She was measuring such elemental distances and balancing such wide facts that she often found herself back in front of the coal grate in the Ware sitting room, with Norah rattling the plates in the pantry, the dead creeper tapping the pane and her grandfather asleep in his chair. Her quality of dominance had risen with her strength and had sharpened her energy; and as her pulses stirred, it had seemed to her as if no horizon were wide enough to satisfy her. She wanted to travel, she wanted change and a sort of instruction newer than the easy conditions of New York. In New York she knew too exactly, she told Mrs. Devon, who heard her with a more and more uncomfortable uncertainty as to all her own presuppositions, what to expect.

"But, my dear, there's an enormous amount of life here!" her mother-in-law had insistently protested. "I'm not too old-fashioned, you know, and

I can tell you many and many an instance of people who, as it's called, have lived."

"But what do you mean by lived?" Olive had shot her quick glance at the amiable elegance of Mrs. Devon's face. "I suppose you mean they've been immoral; and immorality means to most people just the relation of the sexes. Yes, but they could be ceaselessly immoral, if they wanted, and to my mind they wouldn't be living. They're empty, ignorant—they're like me. We're all the same, as a race. We're sure, we're dull."

"Yet you must admit, my child, that there's a splendour in New York!" Olive could tell that lately, across luncheon tables, she had picked up an attitude of acute patriotism; "the skyscrapers—how magnificent! And the roar and rush of it, the bare beauty of those steel frame works and those great swinging cranes, against the sunset!"

Olive shook her head. "I don't see it. Life is universal, and I've too much thirst to limit it to something which is so little conscious of itself as our own civilisation."

"But people admire you so, Olive!" Mrs. Devon's tone with her, Olive noted, was always set now at a pitch of protestation.

"Yes; but their admiration," Olive's smile hesitated, "is too easy. They've asked me endlessly to their houses or they've neglected me, they've liked me or disliked me, but there's been no character in either their antipathy or their kindness. I begin to think my grandfather was right when he said it took a long time for a community to deal in character. New York's a crowd, and that's all."

"Well, you and John are beyond me!" was all Mrs. Devon could sententiously say. "And he's going to have a quite marvellous career, they tell me. Too odd, isn't it? One can think of John solid enough, but not with a career. And if you trot him off to Europe to do nothing . . ."

"Oh, he has a design to make for a competition in the spring," said Olive lightly. "That will take him two or three months of Paris; and he deserves a holiday. Besides, as I tell him, either we live according to rote or we don't, and rote, here, means expensive food, expensive servants, and a house with a white marble front. Forgive me if I say again that that's not life."

Mrs. Devon regarded her, with her small glance suddenly shrewd. "And when do you expect to reach China?"

"In my progress? Oh, ultimately."

"Can John be an architect in China, my dear?"

"Probably; and if not, it will all be learning, experiencing, adventuring."

Mrs. Devon broke out suddenly. "But you're not going because you want adventure! You're going because you want to have a good time. I'm sure I don't know what the difference between the two is, but I feel it in my bones."

Olive had laughed, and she herself was the one to remark that it was fortunate that Devon had an income apart from his business. "It won't give us a house with a marble front, even in China, but it will give us what we want, you see; what we happen to want."

Mrs. Devon's glance was more than ever puzzled.

“But when your sables fade—!” was all she could exclaim. “And what you want—” she hesitated. “Does John always want just what you do?”

“Always,” said Olive instantly; and when Mrs. Devon murmured that that was rather magnificent, she ended the conversation, with her surest touch, by remarking that she herself called it convenient rather than magnificent.

Nothing could have been less in the key of his mother’s tone than Devon’s acceptance of her wish to displace themselves. She remembered the one rapid, silent glance he had given her, the night when she had first opened the question, looking across at her from beneath his lowered lids, with his paper fallen to his knees and his hand, which kept the brown thin look of youth, stroking his chin. It was like his brevity of comment that this charged look should alone have expressed to her all the shades of his opinion, all the cross-questions involving his work and his connections, and all his dislikes and likes in the matter. Before she could catch it, it was gone, and he said, in his absent way, that he supposed it could somehow be put through, that his competition design could very well be done in Paris, and that they might let their house.

Most of their communication in the last months had been tacit, so far as any definition of his feeling went. This instinctive silence in him surprised Olive more than anything else. The friction which she naturally stimulated had always, in one way or another, been expressed. Silence had never been one of the attributes of life in the little house at Ware, and she had inherited something of her grandfather’s assumption that unless

ASCENT

opposition were phrased and vociferous, it had not been provoked to a point where sheer imposition could down it. She recognised, now that he fell more and more into it, how deep the reticence in Devon had always been. His devotion was none the less constant and none the less lit by his dry glancing criticism, like the flash of a fantastic light in an intelligence she could never measure. Since their last talk about Ames there had once or twice risen to the surface of her mind the suspicion that there were things in Devon himself which she could not compute. But the thought had no resonances for her, and she had summarily disregarded it.

Yet she recognised that the balance between them, since that night, had been to the slightest extent disarranged. This had been most evident to her in the differing ways of their acceptance of the little Beatrix, who was named for Mrs. Devon and who seemed, for the moment, like nothing so much as her grandmother, with a frail blonde quality completely removed from Olive's. Devon was glad of this, he had said, in the first hour when he bent over her and Olive on the bed.

"There's to be only one of you, you see!" he had exclaimed, with his smile full of what lay behind his comment, as he laid a hand first on her shoulder and then on the fine gold of the child's head.

Her weakness had surged over her in a sudden wave, and she had lifted her hands to grasp his arm.

"You've still this wonderful faith in me?" she had asked.

"Oh, in much more than you—in her!" He had evaded it with perfect kindness, and had turned to ask

the nurse a question. But her impression that he had closed a door had been definite enough to have a definite effect on her. The sense that she was missing an experience which he possessed had touched her obstinacy and stirred her desire to imitate it. She had looked down at the little creature on her arm, and had repeated to herself the facts of its dependence and helplessness, that it was part of herself, that this was the greatest of initiations. For days she tried to give these thoughts force and life and to place some credence in them. She asked perpetually to have the child with her, she kept it close to her while she was saying her prayers, and felt continually for its warmth against her shoulder. As she rested in her darkened room, with the curtains drawn against the hard winter sunlight and only the rise of the fire to tire her strained head, she seemed to see what Ames would have said to this attitude and how fitting he would have considered it, and that she would have earned the commendation of even his difficult taste as she lay with the shining head against her and her rosary twined through her clasped fingers.

Devon had spoken less of the child and seemed less occupied by it than she. He held it at times, usually alone in his library, and when she was able to walk from room to room, Olive found him frequently beside the cradle, watching the fragile hands move. The more she surprised these slow disclosures of his feeling, the more her own silence grew. But there frequently swept across her face, like the darkening of a cloud, a gust of exasperation that her attitude should be so invariably tested by the reality of his own; and as soon as she was strong enough, she had broached

to him the subject of her restlessness and her desire to travel.

She let her eyes follow the slant of the afternoon sun down the long alley. Beyond her the grey front of the palace faced the pale light, with all the compactness of a tradition older than itself, immemorial and secure. The assurances of her surroundings seemed to her beyond the rise and fall of history and the vicissitudes of change. Whatever France did, it existed as a spirit, far above even the beauty of its manifestation. The clear pool of sunshine around the pond, with the gay French children moving at its edges, the inimitable personality of the bent black-bonnetted women and the light intelligence of the younger ones, all appeared to her to unite and blaze with a quality representative of a whole people. She felt her sense of life palpably quicken. The pulse of enthusiasm had never in just this way beat in her veins. For the first time she was experiencing the sense of the dominance of a civilisation; and when she measured these laws of long developments and consequent adjustments against her infinitesimal individuality, her former conception of beauty seemed to her to have been limited and constricted to nothing but the image in her glass.

She had turned her eyes along the alley leading to the gates which gave on the Boulevard Saint Michel; and suddenly she made out, amongst the moving figures, one which easily detached itself as Devon's. Her attention set fixedly on him, as he made his way in and out of the scattered people and approached, sometimes in view and sometimes hidden from her. Perhaps this heightened apprehension was what she

felt him to be constantly in search of. For the first time his participation was explained to her by this sense of a sharper and finer taste of living than any she had yet imagined. The stimulation of the thought that she could capture it lifted her eyes and heightened the carriage of her head; then she dropped impatiently back in her chair. What good would an added sensitiveness and a quickened consciousness like his after all do her, since they would impose upon her laws which wouldn't, in her instinctive terms, pay? Did she see herself, she wondered ironically, living in an unseen inner world, like Devon, or in a Carmelite monastery, perhaps, like Ames?

XVIII

WHEN Devon was only a few yards distant and finally emerged from the shifting knot of children and mothers, as they moved to and fro in the summery softness of the afternoon, Olive saw that he was not alone.

The young man who was beside him, suiting his shorter pace to Devon's long one, and with his whole presence a flash of Gallic cordiality, was nearer her own age. He was fair, with a fair upturned moustache and eyes so light that their quick vivacity was sometimes grey and sometimes blue. He wore his rather loose clothes with a carelessness a trifle studied, and swung his stick with a touch of amusement at his own energy. Even as they drew near Olive was instinctively aware, in his rapid conveyance of ability, that she had not yet seen anyone so completely of his race.

Perhaps because of her sense of contrast, her first look, however, as the two paused before her chair, was at Devon. Against his companion's blondness, his lean dark face, whose light lines showed already in a visible tracery, had suddenly a particular quality. His eyes looked at once more smiling and more grave, and his tall thin figure fuller of both his indolence and energy. She wondered whether this rapid play of a new light on him had not struck from his carefully neutral tints new characteristics. He had always been more himself, she remembered, with Ames's rapid interest playing on him. . . .

She drew her thoughts together, with a sudden effort. To feel herself confronted by different qualities of the same admiration, in both men's faces, made her immediately aware of how charming she must look, with her dark wrap outlining the whiteness of her throat, and some white carnations drawn through the lace which fell away from it. She held out her hand, in response to what Devon was saying, with the smile which always touched her beauty like a light.

"It's René Mallary de la Rivaudière, you know, of whom you've heard me talk so often! My wife's done worse than that, my dear boy. She must have heard my mother talk, not of you—you frighten mother too much—but of your own mother and your terrific estates and all that; and since I caught him at our door, I refused to let him go away without seeing us, and brought him along with me to meet you."

Rivaudière released her hand, with a light pressure. "Devon, of course, like all Americans, goes in competently for detail, and incompetently misses the truth! The truth is quite simply that I insisted on coming. Not the worst report your so charming mother-in-law could have given of me would have deterred me. You haven't"—he turned his quizzical look to Devon—"troubled yourself to condemn me to your wife?"

Devon interpolated that he had left that responsibility to the future, but his smile at the younger man was full of liking. "He's a socialist, Olive, and heaven knows what else; you see his English is better than ours because he's studied it; in addition to these talents he's got some remarkable dry points, and he's a captain in the Armée de l'Air, with all sorts of honours and more than twenty victories to his credit . . ."

As Devon ran on Olive's eyes fixed on the young Frenchman's face. Her instinctive search, in the aspect of anyone who for the first time confronted her, for a sign of response to her own insistent attitude, had never been more immediately gratified. Standing with his hat still in his hand and his face turned to the clear late light, Rivaudière's eyes were as full of the play of his frank pleasure as his smile. His easy courtesy seemed outspread to express his appreciation.

"That is all quite true, dear Mrs. Devon. Even Devon's untruths are true, aren't they? He is such a magnificent example of your conscientious, nervous race. But we sometimes find—do we not?—that if one pulls these alleged glories to pieces—" his gesture was full of a resigned amusement. "I assure you mine are very pale; except for the fact that your husband is my charming friend, and that you and he are at last in Paris, and confronting me. And now what will you do? Will you both come off somewhere to tea?"

Devon laughed and glanced at his watch. "Your guile, my dear boy, is as I expected. When I've just told you I was this moment due at old Destournelles's—the old chap who used to make us so miserable with our scale drawing at the Beaux Arts. I'll leave Olive to you, as you so evidently mean I should, provided you'll finally see her to a taxi and started for home. We're dining out at eight, I think?"

Young Rivaudière had listened with his light semblance of attention while Devon confirmed the details of their evening engagements, and had taken his hand just as effusively, at parting, as his look had seemed to play over Olive's beauty. But when Devon, with his dry nod, had turned away and passed on down

the alley, amongst the crowd, he took the vacant chair beside Olive and bent forward with a suddenly different accent in his smile.

"I am so immensely glad to see you, Mrs. Devon! But then, let us admit it, I have seen you!"

"You've seen me?" Olive's eyebrows raised.

"Yes. Last night, at the Variétés. Seen you—!" He laughed. "It would have indeed been difficult not to see you! You were—you'll forgive me—so exquisite. You had such a special quality, which so separated and isolated you in that crowd. From my seat—I was with a friend—I couldn't trace more than the back of your head and sometimes, as you turned, almost your profile. I didn't at all, from the back of *his* head, make out Devon; so that though I saw you were a stranger, I didn't place you. Now I find myself confronted by the happiest of coincidences. But as if one needed to place the universal, by a name or a nationality! And you—again you will allow me?—are universal." His gesture amplified his smile. "And what a charming play, wasn't it? As old as all the hills, but so lightly and surely done!"

Olive's thoughts were rapidly moving, warmed with the warmth of Rivaudière's enthusiasm. She could even fancy that her attitude, in the garden chair, grew a little finer, that her head rose more delicately and that her hands, in their long gloves, crossed in her lap with a deeper repose. But his last phrase, in its easy transition to the intrusion of another note, caught her with a touch of astonishment.

"Ah—I think I remember!" she paused. "Once I turned—to lift my cloak, or for some such reason—and I caught sight of you. You were about two rows

behind, I believe? I remember noticing how a very fair Frenchman stands out in a crowd. I think," her amusement was full of ease, "there was a lady with you."

Young Rivaudière answered immediately and distinctly. "There was—and a charming one."

Olive's thought paused again. She had never before heard quite this competence of tone. One of the finest of Father Ames's qualities, in her view, had been his finish and his command of every form of human exchange. She recognised this as different. Nothing she had before called ease equalled this intellectual agility which took the forms of a courtesy. Rivaudière's last words were as impersonal as the pleasure he had expressed in the play, a moment before. But she realised that they were meant both to guide her and to warn her, and that his companion on the preceding evening had been a person who both deserved recognition and for whom he insisted on it.

He was meanwhile bending forward again, with his voice returned to its earlier key.

"Of course, you Americans are always amazing, and you must know it! Your facility's part of your beauty. You learn a nation as you pick up an accent; but you . . . ! You seemed to me, last night, the epitome of all of you!" He laughed. "I said to the lady I was with—and who is a person all penetration—that you were more,—that you were the epitome of all the women I'd ever seen. Your rarity, the vivacity of your intelligence—ah, one gets those things even from the back of your neck!"

Olive's smile showed. "Your calculations are too rapid to be profound. If you'd stopped to think, you'd

never have mentioned such a conclusion about one woman to another!"

Rivaudière's gesture seemed to her to mark the boundaries of her narrower sophistication. "Ah, but to such a woman as I had the pleasure to be with, one mentions everything! And Devon; every time I see him he seems to me only more himself, more intact, more firm—and yet more feeling. We've all, in my family, the highest regard for him. My sister asked me about him and you only the other day; and for her, in her cinema-like life, to remember anyone—!"

"If John told you anything, on the way here, he must have told you how I've read your sister. The first volume of her poems I ran across was like a sudden glimpse of all the countries of the world; and my youth—" her shoulders rose and fell—"wasn't so full of those brilliant accidents!"

Rivaudière regarded her for an instant more closely. "Wasn't it? You weren't of New York, like the Devons—that I remember hearing my mother say; and to look at you—one sees you blooming, like a flower that's very pale and yet very strong, out of some cold spot in the northern country!"

Olive shook her head. "You're fatally wrong. Yes, it was a cold enough and bare enough place, and in a hard, bitter climate; but I never bloomed. No, no! I grew angrily and savagely, with every man's hand against me and my hand against every man's. You see, I've not the usual woman's temptation to see my beginning as extraordinary or unusual." Her eyes lingered for a second on his. "I'm as much a realist, in my way, as your sister is in hers."

"Oh, my sister . . . ! But she has done what all

realists do at the last; she had been tricked into a realistic romanticism."

"Well, I shall never be," said Olive clearly. "But it's my disadvantage that it doesn't matter what I am; and Madame de Rives's advantage is that she's great."

"But surely you know it—that you've the great quality!"

Rivaudière's exclamation broke from him with such warmth that she felt the stir of it. She bent forward, following with her eyes the stretch of the converging walks and the bright figures which thronged them, and with her look rising to the golden faun of the trees and the clear still sky.

"Have I? Or isn't it rather true that it has me; that I'm the victim, as everyone with the desire for experience is always the victim?" She waited for a second, as if she permitted him a further step in her confidence. "I must admit to you that I've never felt a more intimate loneliness than I have already felt, here, in Paris."

"Loneliness? And why?"

She shook her head. "You are all marvellous and brilliant and secure. Even a few hours have taught me that. But what good does that do me,—I, who want so much that I never get anything?"

"You say you want so much?" Rivaudière broke in; his interest now, beneath his admiration, was undeniable.

"I want everything," she exclaimed; she was conscious that she had grown a shade paler and that her pallor must be doubly exquisite, as he saw it against the open stretch of western sky. "There's no boundary, no

nationality, no field left, when one wants all I want. Oh, I shall have a taste of life here, as I've had it in New York, as I had it in my childhood—and a taste only. That's the only thing that's great about me—my avidity."

"But can't you, here, satisfy it—your avidity?"

"No—" she hesitated. "I'm better than that. I know too much, you see, to be able to satisfy it; and France has already shown me," she chose her phrase, "all I want and all I shall never have."

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Devon, I told you you were a miracle . . ."

He paused, and she felt his look on her half-averted cheek. She shared his silence for a second before she spoke again.

"It's absurd, isn't it—the lack of any sense of fitness in fate! Here John and I come to Paris for a few months, for him to work and for me to educate myself in all I don't know. It sounds simple enough. Yet underneath there are always lying the great facts about ourselves—so near the surface, so terribly unescapable. Absurder still," she turned back to him, "you who came to see me as a dull duty, to give me addresses and to do me the small services one does to travellers, find yourself talking not to a person but to a human being!"

She waited. The last light was showing on the bright parterres and the clock over the Senate Chamber struck six. Behind her she could hear the drip of the Medici fountain, against the deep stir of the city and the long flow of the traffic. For the first time, in weeks so innumerable that they stretched back to her hours with Father Ames, she felt a sudden consciousness of

the vivacity of her intelligence and the secure power of her personality. By one of her quick reversions of thought, she found herself transported across the intervening years and at the end of a thread of recollection which had spun out beyond her present consciousness. She could remember the still penetration of the vivid winter day and see the sparkle of the illumined snow, and feel that her eyes were wide and smarting from her unaccustomed tears. Across the road lay the Ware churchyard, and she and Devon stood for a moment, indecisively, at the Lacy gate. From this point of dissection she could see that she must have been very young and maladroit in her dealing with him; but it remained in her mind the first occasion when she had made use of her emotion to exert an influence and determine a tribute.

"And now," the inner stir of her face faded in her smile, "I shall get you to fulfil your promise to John, and see me into a cab."

It took Rivaudière a moment, she realised, in spite of his own rapidity, to follow her lead and to rise.

"Miracles can't wander in cabs alone!" his lightness met her own. "No—I insist! I must be allowed to see you home. You can do amusing things like sitting here in the Luxembourg, but you cannot do mad things, like getting lost. Ah, you Americans are so courageous; but the trouble is that you don't know what to be afraid of, so that your courage is no virtue to you . . . !"

XIX

IN the next weeks, Olive frequently told René de la Rivaudière, with her restless glance turning to him, that the chance which had thrown him in her path had meant her to see in him all of France. As the autumn drew itself out and lengthened into the first winter days, her apprehension of Paris, of the nation, of its stored treasures, of the clear simplicity of its actions and the amazing intricacy of richness in their results, ran side by side with her knowledge of his quick charm, of the gesture which every one of his words contained and with the perpetual significances in his smile.

He was constantly at her door and in her motor, with an easy persistency which, he didn't disguise from her, was permissible only because she was a foreigner. He had begun to be with her in her first days of strangeness, when Paris had looked at her, she felt, as exteriorly as she looked at it; and as their companionship deepened and grew, her surroundings had in their turn grown both closer and wider to her. Rivaudière had, even at the first, laughed with her over the differences in her errand from that of the usual person. She wasn't looking for the highest manifestation of pleasure, either in the large or in the details of theatres, shops, and food. Nor was she set persistently on the acquirement of a culture such as so many of her compatriots were pursuing with what Rivaudière cited as a cruelty of relentlessness. She wanted the Sorbonne as little as she wanted the races. What she was

in search of was a profounder information. "I want it to teach me myself," she often told him, as they turned, on the bright chilly mornings, between the pale brilliance of the Tuileries walks, or saw the stars, at night, over the golden Invalides dome; "I've always been aware of my force—oh, forever. But it's been an irresponsible force. Here, you're all intelligence, and your intelligence can teach me that science of personality I want most to know."

Rivaudière's eyes never failed in their admiration; but neither did he fail in the note which, in their first talk, he had sounded. His growing intimacy with her never lost sight of his criticism, in the light flavour of his personalities. He would readily rejoin, to such observations, that she was feeling the stimulation of Paris so intelligently because she herself was nothing but intelligent.

"Nothing?" She threw the question to him one afternoon in her open car, with her eyes bright with amusement over the soft fauns and browns of her sables.

"Nothing," he retorted, with his inerrant confidence. "You're perfectly ignorant of all but your mind. Your ignorance is so vast that it is complete."

"But after all my intelligence is radically me," she had persisted. "It must in itself teach me."

"No—it's not a personal intelligence. It's a magnificently egoistic one—you know the only virtue of a poor devil like me is that I'm frank!—but it hasn't the quality of personality. It is still combatting, imposing, insisting. It doesn't simply exist."

"Like Madame de Rives's?" she suggested.

"Perfectly—like my sister's. And against all this old

slow world of ours, which hasn't your facile American enthusiasm, you're measuring your egoism. Some day," he made his usual gesture, "perhaps you'll cease to measure and really be."

"Time has nothing whatever to do with it!" she broke out, with her sudden frown. She was always puzzled, in view of his persistent care to keep the flash and answer of their talks light above the variety of their suggestions, to feel in herself a lack of any corresponding lightness. "What you miss in me may come to pass in a second!"

He shook his head. "No, my dear lady—that would mean you died. We know too much about life—it never does those things. Death alone might give you such an initiation. I've seen the war, you see; ah, it's a sad enough thing to have survived it. And one does not want you," his smile met hers, "to die just yet."

He was never more pointedly personal than this, in their prolonged talks and their free wanderings together; but, as a nascent sensitiveness in her felt, all his attitude to her was a personal one. At first she had expected from him some of the signs of a warmer admiration such as she had accustomed herself to demand. Yet his avoidance of them was perfect. He would pay her, and in anyone's and everyone's presence, tributes fantastic in their gaiety of extravagance. She felt them bodiless things, light decorations used to trim his easy talk; and at the same time a deeper current ran beneath them, of the assurance of an inner feeling which was never exposed. For the first time in her experience she began to be aware of a light manipulation in a highly personal relation. Rivaudière's very ardour was composed of shadings

which ended in a smile, as if his civilisation had taught him that the chief charm of such a situation was in the play of its uncertainties, while all its circumstances drove forward to a certain end.

This compactness of form seemed to her, in her imagined parallel between him and his race, to be the acutest manifestation of the French power. She had never imagined that living could be so a matter of the intelligence as it was in his hands or that every thought could have so sharp a point. There had been nothing lax or flaccid about old Lacy's mind. But its hardness had been without shape or outline and its intention had all gone into bitterness. Rivaudière's brain had the tempered fineness of a worked metal and the resiliency of life. It was not congealed by prejudice or weakened by violence. As she listened to the quick comments he threw out, on experience, on art, on the human relations, interspersed with his embroidery of speculation and ending always in the finish of a conclusion, she felt that she had never before been aware of an intellectuality which so represented the finest delicacy of sophistication and the fusion of charm with mind.

Her sense of her own potentialities had never been more deeply stirred to action. Every circumstance of her days added to her conviction of her capacity. She was aware of the sensitive rapidity of her appreciation, in the face of whatever picture or building Rivaudière took her to see, of the aptness of her quick comments and of the ease with which her thoughts made their allusions. The aridity of her youth seemed to her to have bloomed in a sudden efflorescence. Under this sunny light even her old resentment of her

restrictions grew kinder, because the long days at Ware, when she had so tenaciously nourished in herself the effort at preparation for future opportunities, had now their use and consequence. Her reading and her studies with her grandfather gave her horizon a present enrichment and extension. All her responsiveness rose to the tests of so highly organised a system of living and of so intimate and extended a consciousness of vivacity. The clarity in the mornings, the slant of the thin grey rains, the scent of the flowers in the vendors' carts, all the diversity of a scene which was all movement, quickened not only her beauty but her thought; and the stimulation was constantly personified in the light sure pressure of Rivaudière's feeling.

It had come to her, with the suddenness of surprise, that the look which was always expectantly in his face held an element which was incomprehensible to her. For his admiration she had been prepared since the moment of their meeting; and she had seen it warm and deepen to a devotion with her general expectancy that it was her due. But the simplicity of its feeling, as it grew, had come to her with a slight shock. For all his tenuous phrases and the gay involutions of his wit, Rivaudière confronted her with a complete directness. He never pressed her or urged her in words to recognise the actualities of his sentiment; but she had never fancied closer intimacies than lay in his assumptions, and at times all her attention set in her attempt to discern, not them or their outcome, but herself.

It was instantaneous with her that, as soon as she had apprehended, through Rivaudière's response to her, her own lack of any physical prescience, she had

set herself to get it. She began to discover what most readily warmed his eyes and his voice, and to stimulate the signs of his appreciation. Latent in her mind there remained a constant astonishment that so vast and rich a field of human incidence should have stirred so little of her curiosity. From the night when she had stood on the little porch at Ware and had felt the changed quality in Devon's touch, she had shrunk from every manifestation of feeling, not because of the form it took but because it seemed to her an inner exposure and a sacrifice of her own invulnerability. Was it not that which she chiefly feared, she asked herself, and which made the mystery of her perpetual separateness from any deep sentiment of emotion? She had begun to admit to herself that the sense of her ignorances more and more weighed on her; that she realised them with an increasing force, and with an increasing intimacy of exasperation.

One night she and Rivaudière had gone together to a concert at the Trocadero, from which Devon had at the last moment excused himself; and when she found herself driving home, with Rivaudière beside her, this sensation of her isolation from the usual human experience had suddenly gripped and held her. The concert had been moving and lovely; and in the little car, as it moved smoothly through the dark streets, she felt less their companionship and the charm and amusement of their exchange, than her own extreme separateness.

Rivaudière was evidently touched by some similar current. His talk gradually died and it was solely in the fluctuating glow at the end of his cigarette and in the steadiness with which his profile was turned, so

that he faced the passing lights, that she was aware of him. His bare hand lay on the fur rug drawn across his knees. Her eyes fell to it; and with the touch of her reflections, she abruptly turned, with a sharp motion, to the opposite window.

She was conscious that, with the unusual accent in her action, Rivaudière's attention had been caught and deflected from whatever absorbed his thoughts.

"Are you tired?" he asked, with an unaccustomed brevity.

She shook her head. In her muteness she felt his scrutiny closer.

"Because sometimes I wonder—" he made a gesture to amplify his words—"how it is that you're not fatigued to death! Facts, facts, facts; and never a moment's digestion of them." His voice sounded ironical in the darkened car. "And is that what, at the end, is going to be the sum and substance of you?"

To her immeasurable surprise—perhaps, she thought, with an instinctive impulse to explain it, because of the music they had heard, or the lateness of the hour, or her tightened nerves—she felt the tears hang for a second on her lashes. "Don't ask me that," she broke out, in a sharper note than she had ever used with him. "Don't you see that I disbelieve in myself most of all?"

Rivaudière shook his head. "Your scepticism has none of the quality of real scepticism. It does not make you happier, or for the matter of that, sadder—more careless or riper. Even your disbelief is disbelief, now." He waited. "Is it ever to be different—I ask myself!"

"No one has ever really wanted it to be different," she said impetuously.

"No, no! I must contradict you! You yourself have never wanted it to be different; and until you reach that point—! Now—" his face again turned to her—"your eyes have no thought in them. The psychological *belle au bois dormant*, isn't it? The difference between a strong odour and a scent with a mystery, between mere food and flavour—that's what your difference is!"

The sense she had constantly had, since their first hour together, of a reserve in him which amounted to a commitment and to which he never unbarred the shortest step, leapt, for some sudden reason, into life.

"You have evidently known very much of some one," her voice had its keenest tartness, "who has all these admirable qualities!"

"Ah, thank God—yes!" said Rivaudière instantly. "Life would be too dull without that! But I've never known anyone," his smile, she divined, had in the obscurity a suddenly changed quality, "who was as lovely as you!"

She was conscious of an intense wish to speak, either to give him the lash of her resentment or to make him with her hand, which lay so close to his, a motion of the appeal which ran throughout her. But the turbulence of her thoughts held her dumb; and all she could do was to raise her head and set her lips with purpose.

Devon, from the first, had been with her very little. It had dawned on her, bit by bit, that his feeling for Paris was something which he kept apart and within himself. He disappeared for hours at a time, and she

would discover that he had been wandering amongst the print shops, exchanging recollections with some of his friends who had never left the rue Bonaparte, or drinking his afternoon coffee under an extended awning on the boulevard and watching the river of its population flow. Like all of his compatriots who had studied here and received from Paris their first enthusiasms, he had continued to regard it as the author and instrument of all their culture. He told Olive that his work on his designs was going well, and this was, in these days, the measure of his confidences. But sometimes, in the Louvre or before a mutilated bit of sculpture in the Cluny, the quiver of response across his face startled even her inattention. It was gone in less than a second; but she felt its imprint in his silences. His original love of the fineness of the city and of its immemorial beauty of thought and aspect seemed now to measure itself against his maturity, and to enlighten his ripeness more than it had ever stimulated his youth.

If she felt the new force in his muteness she was never able to define it. She was becoming more and more aware of the division between his superficial concessions to her and the integrity with which he guarded his own opinions. He was unfailing in his careless good temper, he played with the baby each day and saw that her little salon was full of flowers; but so far as any expression of his thoughts went, its absence was unfailing.

She had shut her book one rainy late afternoon, when he came in from a *matinée* at the Français to find her still in front of their little fire; and as she looked up at the closed mask of his expression she

was conscious of a deeper incapacity than she had yet realised in regard to him, and a correspondent irritation of her mind. It was one of the few days when she had not had a message or a note from Rivaudière; and the suspicion had crossed her mind, when Devon took up the theatre list at luncheon and said he was off for an afternoon with Corneille, that he had been so readily sure that Polyeucte and Pauline would bore her because he wanted to be alone.

Nothing ever puzzled her more than her sense that there might be something wearing in the extreme concentration in which she existed; and for a few seconds, with her head thrown back against the cushion of her chair and her fingers still holding apart the pages of the old brown Montaigne Rivaudière had brought her the day before, she searched Devon's face.

She listened absently while he declined her suggestion of tea, observed how wise she had been not to go out in such a rain, and said he was off to his room to put in an hour on his designs, before dinner; then she broke into one of her sudden exclamations.

"Sometimes I wonder if in the last weeks you've even seen me!"

She was definitely aware, as she spoke, that her purpose was not so much to elicit a reply from him as to stir his interest. He turned slowly—she had noticed that his movements were always more deliberate when he was surprised—and with his hand on the door he looked back at her, across the little room.

"I might answer, have you been here to see?"

Olive's gesture had a sweep in it like one of old Lacy's movements. "And you'd also find such a vague phrase, I suppose, to explain away René de la Rivau-

dière? I suppose he's not been a reality, either?"

Devon laughed. "No, my dear, I'm not sure that he has." He broke off, with the irony of his eyes on her for a second. "Rivaudière's got too much the technique of such situations to make them real."

"But you're not sure that I have?" She put her retort in the form of a question.

He waited before he answered. "You're using weapons you don't understand; that's the reason they're dangerous."

His tone was so implicative that she felt her annoyance quicken under it. He was always puzzling her by his arrival at certainties which she had only half divined. She hesitated for a second and then drew an opened note from her book and tossed it over to him. "It doesn't seem so very mysterious, when one reads that!"

Devon ran through the letter. He kept it in his hands as he ended, with a brief laugh.

"Well,—I was more nearly right than I thought! The old mother has actually packed her up to Paris—and they detest to leave the country in winter—to look you over. And you'll see, in consequence, one of the most interesting women in Europe. Oh, don't mistake her flattery! 'My brother writes such delightful accounts of seeing you'—and all that! Her end's simple enough."

"Her end," said Olive tartly, "will, I'm afraid, have to be mine."

"Perhaps; but she'll find a way," he waited again,—
"to let you know its necessary limitations. Americans are too romantic for Frenchwomen to allow the men of their families to lose their heads over them, as they

might think it healthy and educative for them to lose their heads over Europeans."

She raised her brows. "My dear John, I'm not accustomed to impose on people anything less than my own terms."

"Ah, but here you're dealing with a system; and an individual, you know, against a system shows up as rather pale!" His tone was as easy as he had always lately made it. "No, I shan't go to see her with you, in spite of her elaborate allusions to me. I don't think I want to see Ghislaine de la Rivaudière again!" His eyes half closed. "When I was over here, just grown, and she a little more than just grown, she seemed to me one of the wonders of the world. Her first poems were being published; and I remember," he smiled at his recollection, "that I didn't know whether to be more astonished at their extreme feeling or their extreme dispassion. She was the first great human work of art I'd ever seen; no—I don't want to repeat it."

Olive had risen, as he spoke. She stretched out her hand, as he ended, and followed with her finger the lines and curves of the cloth of his sleeve as she stood beside him. Her touch went from his shoulder to his elbow and from his elbow to his wrist, and slipped over his hand to linger for an instant.

"Why on earth you ever cared for me . . . !" she said absently, with one of her quick sighs.

She was aware that Devon's motionlessness changed suddenly to intention, and for the quickest second she felt his lips on the parting of her hair. All he said, however, was that he'd planned to spend the next day at Chartres and that she must make his excuses to Madame de Rives.

"You're extraordinary in your knowledge, John—!" she broke out impetuously. "Of Rivaudière, of everything about me!"

"Yes," he put it dryly; "I rather think I am. But I've my own ideas, you know. You can follow your line all you please—but I must follow mine. You don't know anything about my line, do you? Except, vaguely enough, that it's you! You don't know that I shall always refuse everything except exactly what I want from you. No," he paused—"it's not that I know very much, but that I divine a great deal!"

He took up a long fall of yellowish lace from the neck of her tea gown and drew it slowly through his fingers.

"My dear Olive, in these weeks you've been extraordinary—never more extraordinary." He dropped the lace he held. "But perhaps the reason you've been so was that everyone expected you to be. . . ."

XX

THE next afternoon, when she looked up at the ornate front of the hôtel on the Cours la Reine, Olive realised that Devon's natural grasp of shadings had displaced her confidence.

If Madame de Rives had lived in one of the dim old houses of the older Paris, she would have seemed less confusing to deal with. But in a quarter the fashion of which was as evident as its luxury, Olive felt her traditions allied with the immediacy of the day. At the moment it seemed to her that she would be less at a disadvantage before an inherited knowledge than before the more surface sophistication which would criticise her conduct and discount her appearance. She vaguely recollected, and with a sense of wonder as to what they could produce, some of the facts she had picked up about the Rives's household—its perfect outer correctness and what were said to be its private conformities, that Rives's had had, from his mother who had been a Roumanian of royal stock, a princely fortune, and kept at Chantilly a racing stable on the largest scale; that his wife had contrived to create about her conduct the mystery of an austerity more unfathomable than any excess, and that her verse was never more tenuous than when the shares in the motor company Rives had exploited and controlled under her influence were rising to a more fantastic value.

To graft this information on her suppositions of

what Rivaudière's sister must be shook her certainty for a moment. Her glance travelled across to the grey winter river, and between its expanse and her eyes the significance of the past weeks composed and took on form and outline. The delicate pleasure of her hours with Rivaudière was apparent in a new light; the readiness of his look, beyond the perfect courtesies of his consideration, and the fine formalities which so accentuated the eagerness of his eyes. Because her possession of his devotion was threatened, it assumed a value suddenly different from that which she had before ascribed to it; and she turned to the door with a sense of alert defensiveness.

As she was ushered down the long length of the successive drawing rooms, she made out at once an immobile figure seated by the fireless grate in the farthest room. Beside it all her other impressions were reduced to insignificance. She was vaguely aware of the rich brown tint of the highly waxed floors, of the magnificence of the *petit point*, from which the coverings had evidently just been removed, and of the multiple ornaments of the great chandeliers, through their swathings of netting. Upright in her carved chair, with her back rigidly straight, Madame de Rives was facing the hard light of the uncurtained windows with a fixity of absorption. As she drew nearer Olive made out that she wore a dress as severe as the single rope of pearls clasped at the top of her thin throat, that there was no book on her lap or on the table beside her, and that her hands were folded and motionless. The last thing, in this hasty scrutiny, that Olive could fancy her was surprised. The sound of approaching steps was evidently permitted to impinge on her concentration only

when she wished it to, and she turned her head only at precisely the right instant.

As she rose, her small pallid face stirred gradually to attention, as if she visibly changed her preoccupation. She did not smile as she held out her brownish hand.

"I am very pleased to see you," she said immediately, and with a perfect gravity, "and I thank you for coming. Will you sit there?"

There was a drop of silence. Across the few feet between them, as she took her seat, Olive's eyes set persistently on her hostess. She was rapidly trying to relate the circumstances of the occasion—Madame de Rives's note, the mere fact of which, in its invitation, was a certain commitment to cordiality, and the bare severity of her reception. Opposite her, with her back still at the angle of the back of her marquise, Madame de Rives returned her look without the slightest deepening or warming of tone and without the smallest concealment of the free play of her inspection. She made a few prescribed observations as to the interest which Paris usually stirred in Americans, and Americans in Paris; but Olive instinctively felt that even in these banalities her mind was prearranged with the same rigour as the chairs were placed in juxtaposition and that the room lacked the warmth or welcome of a fire and tea.

For a moment Olive's response hung, in the unaccustomed strangeness. Her very beauty, as she divined it must appear against the pale grey taffetas of her chair, seemed to droop under such a measurement. It had at once told with Madame de Rives—of that her prehensive faculty was certain; but it was already

catalogued and weighed, and what existed of it was only its relation to standards of which Olive had no cognisance.

"We feel it so particularly fortunate, my mother and I, that my brother, who is really all intelligence, should through this charming chance of knowing you have known a little of the modern America." Madame de Rives had as she spoke the complete absence of movement which made a gesture, in its rare occurrence, so significant. Her scrutiny played as fixedly as a light in her dark face. "We travel, you know, so badly; and for René to gain so much of America through you has been like gaining it through a delightful work of literature. You have an apartment in the rue Pierre Charron, I believe. But do you not pay a frightful price for it?"

Olive smiled, with her clear eyebrows rising. "Really, I don't know that by our computation we do. I suppose we pay more than we ought to pay; but in contrast to the gain of our months here, it is so absurdly small a comparison . . . Do not think all Americans are mere spendthrifts." Her smile deepened. "Some of us are imaginative, which may easily be mistaken for extravagance."

"Ah!" said Madame de Rives vaguely. "And your husband—I recollect him very well, when he was here some years ago. He was so sympathetic and delightful. We had never seen an American in the least like him. It must be a very vast country, is it not? My sister-in-law had a friend who was once taken by some people, of colossal fortune, on a private train to San Francisco. It was amazing, she said; one had even a typist to write one's letters; but she could not con-

ceive why they invited her to go. You are all very hospitable, are you not?"

"No more so, I am sure," Olive's return was rapid, "than your brother has been to my husband and me."

"Yes, René is a dear boy. Yet a little less easy than one fancies, perhaps, to deal with. And your mother-in-law? She and my mother were friends, it appears, in their girlhood, when they were at school—not, of course, at the same school. We cannot afford your luxuries of education. Is she as charming as ever? I remember that once when your husband was here, he brought from her to my mother one of those inimitably fine shawls, made of the Scotch wool. It has been washed now countless times, and would you believe that it never shrinks!"

Olive's muteness held her for an instant. She was trying to associate her interlocutress's even tones with the fiery beauty of her verse, whose glow had reached her in the distant Ware winters. Her very words, as they fell with the purity of accent which means a command of several languages, had, beyond their meaning, their fine contradictions. They were as expressive as her appearance itself. Its simplicities were so carefully composed, and the hand on which she wore only her wedding ring was thin with a sensitiveness of feeling. She had all the marks of the varieties of an achieved experience; and yet—Olive thought—she could talk with an unsimulated interest in these terms and observe the small niceties of a universe in which they were important.

Her instinct of aggression gave a light tinge to her voice.

"My reason for accepting your suggestion that I

should come to-day—beyond the pleasure of seeing you—was really to tell you just that—how much we appreciate your brother's kindnesses. My husband has always valued their friendship, and he's been so particularly glad to renew it. With me, of course," she spoke slowly, "it's been different."

"Indeed?" Madame de Rives's eyes were as opaque. "And how, different?"

"Different because of the differences," Olive's answer was as prompt, "in his kindness. I needed perhaps more help in understanding things than my husband; and perhaps that is the reason why his kindness to me has been special. I've lived, you see, a more isolated life than most American women;" her smile gleamed; "but now, at last, we are beginning to learn the strength of our isolation."

"Ah!" said Madame de Rives again. It was her single word. She held her position of impartial attention, with her fingers as motionless in her lap. The inscrutability of her attitude was so perfectly beyond the reach of the conveyances of words that Olive felt her own cleverness suddenly denuded of point and fibre and useless in its very agility. She felt herself moved by a quick touch of impulsiveness.

"I hope you will realise that, in the matter of all your brother has done for me, I do very greatly appreciate it." Her words had the tincture of her sudden feeling.

"My brother likes strangers," said Madame de Rives imperturbably. "He is always a little intrigued by the qualities in their minds which he does not understand—especially if the stranger is a lady, and so charming as yourself."

The quiver of obstinacy at the corner of Olive's mouth hardened. "He doesn't strike me as a person whose taste in such matters is general."

"Men are all general; the instinct to be specific occurs with them so rarely. They have, of course, their enthusiasms—" her eyes caught Olive's, "and I am particularly interested to see you because my mother and I have both understood that René has had a very real enthusiasm for you."

Olive was conscious that her flush slowly rose, and her look fell to her hands; she smoothed the wrinkles of her long gloves reflectively. "So far as that goes, I don't know—" she was again held by her uncertainty.

"Ah, but you must very well know—as intelligent and sympathetic as you are! And you must also know," her voice carried on clearly, "René's nature. His evanescence, his charm—for the moment they are inseparable. His personality is not yet aware of itself. Even all these mad modern theories that he has—" Madame de Rives paused, as if she selected the key of her continuance. "Theories—they tell me that in America everyone has them. Our forms, I suppose, transplanted. But do you ever hold very long to one? That is what I say to René. He is so diverted by these intellectual performances of his. But for the important things of existence, he is a more inexorable formalist than I. I mention these things," her shoulders rose and fell with an imperceptible lightness, "because I know, as a woman, how one builds any such friendship as exists between you and René on these facts. I myself," she made one of her incomparably brief gestures, "should not of course consider Adeline Bray an obstacle."

All the insinuation of her instinct and the echoes of Rivaudière's reserves flashed, in a second, into the name, as Olive heard it. It took her only that second to smile and to steady her look, but she had no illusion that her response had been rapid enough for her companion.

"I don't know the person you mention," she responded; "nor do I know of her."

The movement of Madame de Rives's hand was now more definite. "But the odd part of it is that my mother and I do; we know both the situation, and her. An admirable child, wholly admirable. She has a real devotion for René. And a person of quite the last note of this new culture. At her little apartment, in the rue de Sèze, they tell me one hears the newest music . . . Stravinsky, Môr, and all the rest. Her father, too, was an admirable person—a professor in the University at Rennes, so poor and with five children. This girl brought up the little ones, at the mother's death, with an exemplary care. When the war came, of course she must needs go off as a nurse, and she and René met. She is not of a distinguished cast, perhaps—she is too short, too solid, too dark; her contours lack fineness; but such an eager, rapid face . . ."

She waited, as if she gave her words the emphasis of a pause; then her even tone continued.

"Her good sense has been admirable, too. Of course these young people of to-day must make their gesture of freedom, and she has no religion, no code, to dictate to her. She and René spent last spring in the Pyrénées, and her father did not seem to consider it other than a pleasant holiday. . . . Yes. But she

quite realises her situation. My elder brother, you see, has no children, so sooner or later our poor René must attach himself and have a son. My mother's ideas are still of the old sort; but no more so—at heart—than René's. He is the revolutionary who will become, in five years, a reactionary. And Adeline understands all this perfectly. She has even played the violin to me and I have been there to tea . . .”

There was the drop of a final silence. Olive's eyes had mechanically turned back to the vista of the successive drawing rooms with their shrouded gilt consoles, the high glint of a mirror here and there, the long cool stretch of the floors and finally, at the end, the grey stone of the antechamber. Down this expanse she could see advance the figure which possessed her thoughts, more vividly than in actuality. The looks she had from time to time caught in Rivaudière's face, his sudden preoccupation, the accent in his tastes and preferences, illuminated and enriched it until the girl was there, with all her restrictions and impotentialities, yet with the innate power of her accomplishment. She was touched with reality by the results of her relation with Rivaudière. The portrait of her was alive. In a few strokes she existed; her strictly dutiful childhood, her adventure of the war, her eager espousal of independence, even the violin so like what would be a deep shade of her skin and resting—Olive was sure—against a square, graceless shoulder . . .

She rose and held out her hand. “It has been charming to see you. You have indeed been most kind.”

Madame de Rives's smile was for the first time deep. Its light ran over the fatigued lines of her face and

lingered in her eyes, as if she had her own measurement of their exchange. She remarked that it had been only a pleasure to make a smallest sign of thanks to one who had given her brother—the dear boy, of whom she was so fond—so many pleasures. She supposed that Olive was very surrounded, very gay, like all her people nowadays; it was good for René to see his world—she felt it indeed necessary for one with his absurd intellectual curiosities. When Olive spoke of the dinner at the British Embassy where so many of the guests had expressed a hope of seeing her, her comment grew absent again. Yes, she regretted not to go, but the last time she had dined there she had suffered from an indigestion of unequalled severity, and heaven knew, with the present ambassadress, what cook they had. To Olive's mention—in a murmur of whose constriction she was conscious—of the final volume of her poems, she returned only her vague exclamation, the sound of which was as impenetrable as her expression, and her eyes wandered to the window again, as she drifted off to a comment on the heaviness of the winter rains in the country and the consequent illness of their old steward. At the door of the second drawing room, where a footman was waiting, she seemed to recollect herself; “and we are sorry not to be able to ask you to dine. But our house is, as you see, closed. My husband is in Belgrade and my mother never leaves Mallary now.”

She murmured an order to the servant and made once more her grave inclination of the head; and a second later Olive found herself descending the wide sweep of the stairs.

The perfect security of her hostess's look reflected

itself, with a sudden accrescence of force and will, in her eyes. As she passed out of the high entrance doors she was already composing the message which, from the nearest telegraph office, she would send to Rivaudière. Her need to see him—more, to face clearly the issue with him—had suddenly become imperative. Yet as she stared for a moment into the deep dusk, with the cold starry lights on the river moving through the first darkness, the wonder flashed through her mind if here, too, she were not being manipulated; if the interview which had just terminated had not been planned to bring her to a crisis, and if this would not prove to be the final point of Madame de Rives's science.

XXI

AS she sat, in the thinning January light, and looked out across the greenish pond, with the grey carp as motionless as silence in the still water, a sharp touch of the same uncertainty arrested for an instant the progressive drive of her thoughts.

Rivaudière had telephoned her, late the night before, and immediately on receipt of her telegram, in so definite a tone that she was conscious that nothing had escaped him, even in the compressed words of her message. It was evidently enough for him that she had summoned him, that she had said there was something she must discuss with him; and that she had put it with such implications of importance, in spite of her haste, that he had felt himself justified in suggesting that they go, the next morning, to Fontainebleau in his motor, to lunch and to spend the day.

Their drive out had had a silence which their drives usually lacked. Olive was beginning to probe some of the beauty of spacing, in an older world, and some of the finer relations between omission and elision. Whenever he made an evident effort of detachment from his thoughts, to point out to her the curve of a hillside or the rise of a spire, she could see, in the quieter quality of his smile, how deeply he was savouring the significances the day had for him. He had turned to her only once with a spoken comment.

“What a still winter sky—and how beautiful all France is under it, with the monotonous green gone

and only the bare earth and the bare branches left! Yes, the country's lovely enough to show its bones!"

"Does it add to it for you, to see it with me?" she had abruptly asked.

He showed her for an instant an expression so genuinely astonished that his usual elaborate courtesies were submerged. "But the presence of no single human being could add to France! You don't yet understand, do you, the indifference and impersonality of time, as a country creates itself?" His smile changed, as he looked at her. "But if it's not wonderful to see France with you, it's wonderful to see you with France!"

After their luncheon he had left her to go on to the park alone, while he delayed at the entrance to give an order about his car. His single question to her, as they stopped at the gates, had been the query whether she were willing to stay and dine, and drive back in the evening. She had let her quick glance answer him, and had turned abruptly to trace with her eyes the sweeping curve of the double staircase, with its creamy tint warmed by the faint sun; and as she had passed through the gates into the park, she was conscious that her sense of expectation had never been keener.

From the first moment she saw it, some quality in Fontainebleau had held her. She told herself, with her ironic flash, that here least of all, in so personal a setting of the past, could she be unaware of ghosts. It was invariably difficult for her to picture any antecedence except in its allusion or relation to qualities like her own. But something in the still rooms, so royal yet so intimate, had touched her rarely touched imagination. She felt them peopled by the residue of feeling—that creatures wholly human in the magnifi-

cence of their pleasure and vitality had here made their brief contribution to the long tapestry of human incidence which the centuries wove. The same forces which had animated these lives were, as it seemed to her, in the complex play of consequence now touching her own. Her gradual initiation in finer values and in the implicative sense had prepared her to comprehend them; and to comprehend them was to measure, for the first time, the meaning of Rivaudière's presence, as he drew near her, along the walk. He passed between the silvery tree trunks, with the long line of the palace behind him and his shadow falling in front of him on the gold-coloured trodden earth, and the sound of his steps disengaged itself against the soft drip of the water, as it ran into the pond. She saw that he did not hurry. His evident enjoyment of a gradual approach to their situation, coupled with his quickly stimulated warmth, seemed to her extraordinarily indicative of his quality, his fearless transitions and his delicate balance of values. She caught in her mind a flare of wonder as to whether she herself could not master such methods of manipulation, and acquire their secret as she had acquired Rivaudière's idioms.

As he took his seat beside her, on the stone bench, the significance beneath the ready ardour of his expression was so visible that the words she had meant to greet him with were arrested. She felt her colour rise, with the pause. She was conscious that her eyes fell, that her hands made a quick, nervous gesture, and she shrank with a sudden uncertainty to her corner of the seat.

The motion, so unaccustomed in her, clearly deep-

ened the light in Rivaudière's eyes. He laid his hand on her gloved arm, and bent nearer to her.

"So you're at last going to let me say to you what I've known I must say—ah, ever since our first hour together, in September?"

Her lips moved uncertainly. "You said, then—do you remember?—that I seemed to you a miracle."

"And then, when I only divined all that you really were—!" His clasp tightened. "It's going to make you wonderfully happy, you know . . . ! Ah, you're too exquisite a creature not to be approached with all delicacy! I've wondered enough what I dared to say to you, I assure you; your people have all of the audacities, but what they see is the audacity, not the feeling behind it. And you know my immeasurable regard for Devon; but he's not French—he seems completely to let you take care of yourself! And you yourself, by your own sign, are willing to listen to me" His eyes searched hers, with as clear a charm in their play of feeling as the care with which he had chosen his words.

Olive waited for a second. The tonic beauty of the day, of the clear pale sunlight, the packed significances of the spot and Rivaudière's tone stirred slowly through her. She had never yet been more conscious of her imperative personal insistence, and her self-imposition had never seemed more alive with directive power.

"You have been extraordinary; but what has been most extraordinary to me has been my own slowness—" she broke off, and the gesture with which she raised her clasped hands to her breast had still the imprecision of uncertainty. "You see, I seem to have thought so little

ASCENT

about it all . . . I have been so ignorant of what gives living reality; and through you—yes, you—and through our wonderful days in all this wonderful beauty, I have learnt. No—it will be like seeing another marvellous thing with you! You have given me so much; and I am ready,” her head rose—“for you to give me more.”

He again bent nearer her, with his look warming to a sudden incandescence. “Ah, but you too have known—you have seen and felt—all the different qualities in my feeling for you! For your beauty and your brilliancy and the rarity of your mind; but above all for your unawakened, untouched capacity, which is the finest form of your loveliness. Ever since I saw you under the tree, with your chin tilted up and your eyes so full of the sky—what haven’t I thought of you!”

She gave him his look back fully, with her last reserves gone before the insistence of his words. “And I of you.”

“That’s what I’d hoped beyond everything—that you would give me the same devotion which I have so deeply given you . . . ! Ah, there’s no feeling in the world, is there, which isn’t a real gift, a real surrender of one’s self . . .”

As he broke his exclamation and she felt the warmth of his hand on her bare hand, from which she had slipped her glove, Olive drew a sharp breath. She was at last face to face with the word from him of which, in the last two months, she had been in constant expectation; and her expectation, she knew, stretched as far back as her arid girlhood, with its pitiless exactions of energy and its lack of any touch

of poetry. This, at last, was her fulfilment of participation. Then something in his last phrase abruptly caught her. Her look of expectancy widened and her hands fell to her lap.

"Surely you have seen, you have anticipated!" he was continuing, with his voice deepening from phrase to phrase. "You've seen what it's going to do for you to be enriched by enriching even a poor beggar like me, who is so little fit to touch your charming feet! One of your beauties is your lovely, cool immunity. But just because it's been so maintained, so separate and so sure, the happiness of sacrificing it is going to be all the more brilliant to you . . ." He searched her eyes. The surprise in her face was now so evident that it arrested him. "But isn't it?" he finally ended.

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"You don't know? But that is delightful of you!"

She made again a negative sign; her lips parted and she stared for a second in front of her.

"It isn't," said Rivaudière, "that you fear in me any lack of consideration for you—surely I don't deserve that!" Her gesture cut him short. "No—I thought not! What is it, then?"

She made a faint movement with her hands. Her eyes were persistently set on the last and thinnest bare twigs, which interwove the trees and stretched to the greyish sky. The deserted park, the stillness of the winter air, and all the scene about them, had moved her sense of drama; Rivaudière's words moved it still more; yet she was clearly conscious that all of these outward signs of what people called emotion paled beside the opposition which his words startled in her.

She didn't yet know whether it were an extreme of ignorance or of incapacity; whether she had lived with these facts dormant in herself, or whether she had touched them all along the line of her experience and was incapable of ever learning them. But she turned, at the end of her silence, a look to him whose confusion came from her crowded thoughts.

"You really mean it—that you expect me to feel that way? That you expect me—" she touched her breast as if she tried to emphasise her incredulity, "to sacrifice what is my inner self to you?"

"Does it seem so strange?" Rivaudière's smile was all reassurance.

She rose suddenly, with her hands still clasped, and looked down at him. "But it never occurred to me you would expect that of me!"

From the bench where he was evidently held motionless by the discrepancy between her tone and his warmth, Rivaudière's eyes looked up at her with a frankness which was all sophistication. "I've hoped—I can't say expected—that you'd really care for me!"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of caring for you . . ." She brushed his doubt aside. "I only ask to live it; but as to sharing with you my thought, my independence, my separateness . . ."

"But what else is caring? You've an amazing beauty; but surely you never thought me so dull a brute that I could be sensible only to that; surely that's what makes feeling—that it extends beyond itself, that it's all life!" He paused, as the concentration of her look and her immobility forced itself on him. "But have you never yet understood what a personal relation means? That it's far beyond the outer things,

the however loved possession, the bodily and definable thing? that it's a real concession, a real gift?"

She shook her head. "Never."

"Not in your girlhood? Oh, I don't ask about Devon, for that would be indelicate—but never? Not in your childhood? One has those relations in the strangest way—in friendship as well as in love, with one's people, with children, with old servants."

"Never," she repeated; her hands were still clasped and the fixity of her look unbroken.

He continued to search her face for a moment, and then a note of impatience broke in on the ardour of his voice. "But isn't that all the more reason for you to want it—a real relation? Isn't that what you'd expected, in letting me care for you and in giving me to understand you cared for me?"

Olive's thought seemed to sweep rapidly ahead. "I don't know—I don't understand it. I don't see why it should be. The outer thing—" her shoulders rose—"is simple enough; but the moment you ask me to yield to you my independence of feeling, to modify, to change—" Her brows drew together in a heavy line.

They exchanged for a moment a long glance. The fragrance of her beauty in the still cold air, the warm softness of her hair against her forehead and the restlessness of her hands still lent Rivaudière's look a glow. But his critical faculty was so evidently stirred that it was almost traceable in the mobility of his face.

He waited again. "If you repulsed me—that I could understand; if I offended you, or if you had a principle in the matter, I could respect it. But to ask of life all its contribution of charm, to want to

ASCENT

be stimulated and yet to refuse to feel—and not because you fear feeling, but because you fear giving . . . !” His incredulity once more arrested him. “There is no consequence about you. Your magnificence—it all fades into air!”

Her eyes caught his, with a new hardness in their depths, as if the sudden sense of antagonism between them were patent and visible.

“And yet you say you have cared for me; is it so impossible for you to care for me as I am? I’ve told you I was willing. . . .” Her sarcasm pierced her voice, as his silence continued. “It looks very much as if I hadn’t been a miracle to you, after all!”

Rivaudière’s flush had risen under the touch of her tone. He hesitated a moment more, and then flung out his hands.

“But one doesn’t order and extort those things—they bloom! Ah, the day I first saw you it seemed simple enough. I thought of you perpetually, you followed me, you disturbed me, you gave that sting to my imagination which comes only when two people are to have a mutual experience. Of course I’d never seen anyone like you; who has? I, on my side, have been ready to give you everything and anything; but that you should for a moment consider my feeling for you so slight, so poor a thing, that it could be merely what we call—in our stupid definitions—physical, experimental, tentative . . . no, all women are not like you!” he declared.

Her quick glance shot at him. Her sense of his retention of the private facts in his life, which his homage to her had never been able to complicate or disturb, had never been more alive. For a moment

she had a dim apprehension of this dual existence of emotion and affection in an old people, of its warm efflorescence, its rigid demarcations, its scrupulous alignment of passions to their own realm and of its deeper dedications. The action of such forces, so simple yet so rich, carried her thoughts far, like one of the long straight vistas of the winter forest; and there hung before her for an instant, in the still air, the little apartment in the rue de Sèze, not a detail of her slight information of which had escaped her—the Stravinsky in the evenings, the gaiety of an unconformed existence, the spring in Spain, the rigid provincial past and the sudden emancipation which would produce such a girl. . . .

Her frown again drew her brows sharply together. "I am not denying the truth of what you say . . ." She broke off; then with a wavering motion, full of beauty, she took a step towards him and her hands spread and opened. "Perhaps you will teach me; perhaps you will help me to learn, to understand. . . ."

"Perhaps!" Rivaudière had answered instantly. His tone had a perfect accent of vivacity. But the equal perfection of the blankness underneath it fell like a lash across her sensitiveness. She heard the long reverberation of the door he had closed, and closed so rapidly and finally that he had hidden from her,—not for her protection but for the protection of his own regret—even his astonishment and his pity. With a word, she felt as if she had passed for him into history and was no more than a pallid portrait on the walls of the palace.

He rose and stood beside her. His face was as blank, under its vivid courtesy, as his voice.

ASCENT

“And now the light is changing . . . you see? We ought not to start too late; and you wanted once more to look at that splendid chimney piece, with the F’s set over it. . . .”

There was some delay in getting their motor; and as she waited while Rivaudière went in search of it, Olive wandered down the street and found herself in front of the church, which he had named to his chauffeur as a meeting place.

In response to an impulse she did not stop to question, she mounted the steps and lifted the leather curtain. In the chilly dusk the interior was colder than the winter air. The flames of the candles before the shrines burned with a fixed pallor and had none of the warmth of light. The silence was absolute. She pulled forward one of the rush-covered stools and sank on her knees, with her eyes set on the Sacred Heart; and her mechanical drop into concentration was suddenly infused with life, and she felt a recollection touch her like a hand.

What drew her thoughts back, she realised, was not the Litany of the Saints, which mechanically occurred to her and which she had never yet sufficiently learnt, but the dead scent of spent incense, of melted wax, and of the human beings who ordinarily thronged the seats. She tried again to expand her thoughts in prayer, but the formula only contracted them. She caught herself wondering why the paper flowers about the Virgin’s altar must always be so hideously arranged. As her wandering memories rose and fell she remembered the statue of the Virgin in Father Ames’s room, and that his taste had never been

finer than in its arrangement; and there again broke across her mind a flash-like impression of his face.

Her instinctive motion was always to avoid it. Whenever she had knelt for a moment, in the churches she and Rivaudière visited, it had always been with a definite denial of any survival of his influence. But under the pressure and turmoil of her sensations, the remembrance became every second more insistent; and she had the pervasive sense that, in some inexplicable way, he with his profundities and Rivaudière with his dilettantism were linked in a like reality.

XXII

“**M**RS. DEVON!” Isabel Bourdas exclaimed, “of course—I perfectly remember her!”

Her eyes followed the long line of the terrace where she stood, down its length and across the scattered groups between the warm brick front of the house and the overflowing stone urns of pink geraniums on the balustrade. Against the spring sky the first green of the trees on the lawns below detached itself; and sifting through their branches came the unmistakable murmur, so special and personal, of the London streets.

Her companion, whose glance was also on the shifting interchange of figures on the terrace, smiled for a second before he answered her, as if her tone gave him his own reserves of thought. As they stood together he was taller than she, built on the same long lines of thinness, with his hair and his moustache already white, against his brownish skin. The ease of his attitude, beside her, testified to a familiarity of companionship which his look, when it turned to her, only accentuated.

“You really are inimitable, you know—your easy observances, your easy lacks of observance—and yet your constant kindness! You can’t help being kind, even when you forget people!”

She brushed aside his tone with a touch of impatience. “Is it at this late day, my dear Francis, that

ASCENT

I must remind you that I'm just nothing at all but a type? I've no character—and I'm too sensible to want to imitate character by being eccentric, which is the only outlet left to women in my unfortunate position. . . ." She laughed. "But I do very clearly recollect Mrs. Devon."

Sir Francis Passmore's glance again passed along the terrace. "She's scarcely a person one forgets."

"She's certainly a person you wouldn't forget!" Her amusement seemed to apologise for her tone. "And where did you run into her?"

"With Minnie Harringford who, I see, has brought her to you to-day. It was last night, at dinner. At first, I said to myself, 'another of these rich clever creatures,' as one always does say about Americans; but afterwards, when I'd had a nearer look at her, I changed my mind." He paused. "She looks extraordinary; but probably she isn't."

Lady Isabel seemed to make, in her mind, a choice which determined the note of her answer. "Well, to you she might be." . . . She waited to follow the direction of his look. "It's amusing, isn't it, that Minnie—dear soul—should venture to like anyone so evidently definite!"

"It's even more amusing," Passmore rejoined, "that Mrs. Devon, on her side, should have the sense not to like dear Minnie. My first impression of her—for of course her beauty's striking—was that she was, as I tell you, like all the rest; aping a life to which she didn't belong, all an affectation of individualism, but in reality fluid—boneless. I thought she'd accept anything—and above all your sister-in-law and Brough House; but she doesn't. She's impressed—but she's

not interested. She's apart—" he hesitated; "and yet she's not indifferent."

Lady Isabel's quick grey glance met him. At first her look was rapid and had the furtive touch of a persistent detachment of attitude; but as it lingered it deepened.

"It is so extraordinary—the way all your judgments of a woman come back to the qualities of personal insistence! We're all alike to you. We all seem to you out for the same thing. You see us, invariably, as invariable—the Mrs. Devons, the Minnies, even I . . . ! You're too much affected by women to have any sensitiveness in your view of them—" Her laugh interrupted her. "Sometimes, you see, I'm almost tempted to say to you what I mean!"

Passmore nodded, with a touch of brevity. It was evident that he was constantly relating his companion to the scene about them, the murmur of talk, the light dresses moving amongst the trees, the groups of men smoking on the terrace and the low deep rooms to which the windows behind them gave view. Her quick voice and the ease of the movement of her thought linked themselves, it was apparent, with all that had produced her. Yet as he confronted her his expression witnessed that she affected his imagination as definitely and as personally as she affected him by her angular distinction. Even in his days of a comparative inexperience—the remembrance evidently passed through his mind—he had felt the force of her attitude of detachment quite as much as he had felt the importance of the traditions which produced it.

"I can't say you've ever been tolerant to my faults," his voice had a touch of dryness. "But then you can't

say I've ever expected you to be! At least I've that consolation—that you're a little more pointedly hard on me than you are on anyone else." He waited an instant. "We're hard on each other. There is that touch of—what would one call it, asperity?—between us which is evident in people between whom too much and too little has happened."

Lady Isabel had taken up her sunshade from the bench beside her and the gesture seemed to put an end to their exchange.

"No, not even in any citation of the past can you appeal to me!" she said easily. "You're marvellous, Francis, but I've finished with you! I'm glad we had our few minutes together; it's the first time we've exchanged a word in ages, isn't it? And of course you know that in reality I've never finished with you! There's Mamma, lying in wait for you; do you see? Your wife's too magnificent. Good heavens, what lace!" She had advanced a step beyond him, and she turned. "As for Mrs. Devon, look out! Oh, not for her, but for her egoism. It's worse than yours!"

Passmore's eyes followed her gesture. "She looks, in that deep violet colour, as if she were the complete actress, doesn't she? Oh, not as all women look actresses to-day, but as if all her rôles were real!"

Lady Isabel's head tilted critically. "No—your real actress immolates herself, she dedicates herself to her interpretation; Mrs. Devon's only interest is to glance over her shoulder and see how much she's impressing her audience. . . . Come; there are too many people you must speak to!"

She had threaded her way, amongst the scattered people, as she spoke, with a word here and there,

and a whisper, as she passed him, to her younger brother—who, with his greyish hair and beard ruffled, was fixing his large shell spectacles on the Swedish biologist with whom he was in deep discussion—that he must remember his manners and talk to Lady Passmore, and had approached the lower end of the terrace. As she paused, close to Olive, her instinctive retraction of cordiality was arrested. Young Lady Harringford, who had brought her to lunch, had just left, and Olive was alone. She had been looking down to the lawn, across the balustrade of the terrace, and in the face she turned and raised, at Isabel's advance, there seemed to linger for an instant the residue of her thoughts. Her beauty appeared to Isabel as intact and unchangeable as she had remembered it. Her penetration had then divined that under the younger woman's dominant certitude there was the restless movement of a force without direction. Yet her eyes were now definitely brushed by the nascent realisation of an insecurity. Some inner pressure had added a touch of strain to the angles of her lips and darkened her glance, as if the steady consistency of her limitations had begun to reach her consciousness; and Isabel felt her curiosity rise into play, before the suggestion.

Olive rose at once, with her look softening under her smile of recognition.

"You don't perhaps quite remember me—? I went to see you during your few hours in New York—" Her tone, Isabel had to admit, was far from any insistence. From the good taste of her ease to the fall of her long dress, the drop of the feathers against her hair, her lack of jewels, her lack of display of any sort, she had mastered imitation, to the closest

point; yet wouldn't Ames have said—Isabel asked herself the sudden question—that it was imitation and not subtlety?

She warmed her voice, as she responded. "I not only remember you, but I was so sorry when I realised, before luncheon, that you were you, that my sister-in-law had had the pleasure of bringing you to us, and not I. My mother is delighted that you came. We seldom see anything so lovely, you know!—Yes, of course, I've the keenest memory of our talk in New York." She had dropped into the seat beside Olive. "You came to see me at the very kind suggestion of our mutual friend, Father Ames."

Olive's eyes met hers for an instant and then turned to an urn of the salmon-coloured flowers beside them. She took up a long trail of geranium vine and drew it through her fingers before she spoke.

"Yes. It was just at the time of my conversion."

"I remember that in a note to me, soon afterwards, he said you had entered the Church. And now, I suppose you have arrived," Isabel's look was not unkind, "to conquer London!"

Olive smiled and her eyes again shifted to the lawns below. "Yes, or to be conquered by it. My husband, my little daughter and I were in Paris all winter—where it's strange enough to me, but not strange like this. Here I'm scarcely able to get my breath. Oh, it doesn't make one thrilled; it's crushing, enormous!"

"But anyone so charming as you finds it easy enough to reduce!" said Isabel lightly. "I'm sure you're doing it. Minnie says you dine out every night!"

Olive's look slowly turned to her. In their direct

ASCENT

exchange of regard it deepened to an irony and a mistrust, Isabel was surprised to see, of herself.

"I think you will understand why I am at such a particular disadvantage here; I am, and you see it. It's not that I'm a stranger, a passer-by, a restless inconsequent being. Many of us are that, and yet we manage to attach ourselves. No—I'm just wise enough to see the uselessness of us all. I like us better when we stay at home, unsophisticated and raw. Even when we're transplanted, we're accidental; oh, I don't mean only Americans! One can't dispose of us in any one nation. I mean all of us who are eternally unrooted and displaced."

"Yes—London's not the city for the displaced; you're right. It has its cruelties, hasn't it? And even to people who so belong to it. . . ."

Isabel's smile was reminiscent. She was comparing the Olive who had sat, so stiff in spite of her apparent ease, and talked with her in the stiffest tone, in the New York hotel, with these richer ways and this rounder and surer personality. She showed the ripeness of more varied contacts and a less tart aggression; but fundamentally was she touched, Isabel wondered?

As her thoughts drifted she could see that Olive's attention had passed for a second beyond her, to the group nearest them on the terrace. A sudden change touched her expression, and Isabel was conscious of an equally sudden warmth in her beauty and a radiation in her vivacity, as if she instinctively responded to the sense of having created an admiration, even at this distance. She turned back to Isabel in a different tone.

"We have a little house in Hill street, which my

mother-in-law found for us. I hope you will come to see us there. My husband's international competition for the plans for the inter-allied building in Paris is just on, you know; but when he is really settled here, in a week or so, I shall be so happy if you will lunch or dine. . . ."

Isabel rose. She vaguely wondered if her first impression of the younger woman had not been too delicate. It was difficult to couple so perfect a plasticity with a progress of sensitiveness or with the difficult stages of any education. She glanced over her shoulder.

"I must let Sir Francis Passmore speak to you; he's waiting to do so, I see. You've not met, I think? That's his wife, with the huge jeweled bag. He's recently married—the great Mrs. Montagu, you know. She's astonishingly handsome, isn't she? She always sits straight and motionless, like that; as if she were afraid of cracking her surface, my brother Terence says! Her only sign of life seems to be that every now and then that little Pom on her lap barks and snarls. You see it's as absurd a world here as anywhere else! And have you heard any of the Irish debate, in the House? Father says that last night it was so amusing."

Olive looked at her keenly. Her curiosity had sharply penetrated beneath Isabel's broad smile. In spite of her easy suppositions and habits of a single angle of judgment, something in Isabel had caught and held her. It was like the flash of a beauty in her marked plainness—not easily decipherable, she felt, and far from obvious. But even to her usual unalert prescience it was evident that Isabel had somewhere had an encounter, an adventure, an agitation, which

accentuated and deepened her. At the thought a stir moved through her mind.

"I should like to ask—" her voice was high and clear, "do you ever have news of Father Ames?"

Isabel's look changed at once to a visible sympathy. "Ah, no—little enough. He's been at the house at Malaga, you know, ever since he took his vows; so his brother the Archbishop said, only the other day, to Mamma. No, of course his silence and ours must be absolute. There was some talk, a month or two ago, of his being given permission to come to England and see his family because of the grave illness of his sister. But one never knows—one never hears. She's Sister Martha of the Cross, you know,—with the Dominicans. She can't live more than a few weeks, at most; such a gay wild creature as she was, Ernestine Ames . . ." she turned, at a step behind them. "I must go to see how Papa is faring with our Serene Highness, whom we've a little on our hands; she's rather a dear, isn't she? And here you are, Francis!"

Passmore had taken the seat Isabel left, with no response to her comment beyond his smile. As Olive's eyes turned back to him his silence, beneath the deliberation of his manner, seemed to her as much of his particular quality as the rapidity and concentration of his glance, as she had caught it to-day and, on the preceding evening, had felt its directness down the length of a long dinner table. He had the easy infractions of rule of his type. His look, as she met it, was at this closer range so defined in its simplicity that she had never imagined so perfect an adherence to the nudity of plain dealing, and she detached her

ASCENT

thoughts, with an effort, from the memory which had touched them.

"I've unfortunately only a moment," he began,—
"I've a committee at half past three—but I want to tell you the pleasure it has been to me, both last night and to-day, to see you; I mean, of course, merely to look at you. You'll think I've cast manners to the winds. One does, you know, with a person like you!"

His tone made a gulf so unexpectedly wide between itself and her last words with Isabel, that it held Olive for a moment motionless; he had touched his words with an insinuation as definite as his look.

"I'm afraid I must tell you that it's fortunate, in that case, that it doesn't seem wise that you should do more!"

Her voice had a note of firmness which did not escape him, for he made a gesture of amused resignation.

"No, probably you're right. You'd find me very little, stripped of my courage, and I should find you were less lovely as I saw you oftener. It's really inexcusable that I should be as rude as this! You're keen on prerogatives and not on form in America, aren't you? That's the inevitable result, I suppose, in a country where freedom has been too easy to get and too hard to keep." His eyes half closed. "That colour's extraordinary, you know; it suits you amazingly."

Olive waited an instant. She had felt, the night before, the sudden sense of being affected by his admiration, brief as it had been; and as he spoke she had known that her eyes softened to a warmer brown and that the colour touched her pallor, as clearly as

she had noted the fact that the other guests had seen Passmore approach her and the interest which his moves elicited. The gradations in her responses had, in the last months, been refined in their variations. Yet, as her smile quivered under the assurance of his, it had her faint touch of irony. She turned her face to the gardens; what was she drifting to, she wondered, that she had passed to this sort of acceptance without differentiation, and that she was so far beyond either the real provocation or the real indifference which are the actions and reactions of feeling?

"I wanted only to pay you my tribute, before I went," Passmore was continuing; he hesitated. "Of course you ought, you know, to have a history; or perhaps you oughtn't! It's more delightful to have all the signs of one without the wear; and you don't look," he again waited, "you don't look as if you'd think anything worth the wear!"

Olive returned his directness of manner; her own, she knew, was the more deeply sardonic of the two. "At least one would always be sure," she said briefly, "that the wear missed you. You'd not stay long enough to see it. You must let me say that I don't see you dealing in mysteries, Sir Francis!"

Passmore rose, as he laughed. "Even amongst your country-people I've never seen anyone so tremendously intellectualised and so profoundly ingenuous! You're no mystery, dear Mrs. Devon—you're only ignorant. There! The Princess is going, I see, and so I can be off. My wife's opening a bazaar somewhere, and she's promised to drop me. . . ."

XXIII

OLIVE had ordered her car, as she left the courtyard of Brough House, to turn away from the park and to run slowly, for the next hour, through the streets. She was conscious that she wanted the sense of anonymity which comes in a crowd; and with her eyes following the flow of traffic and the intermingling figures on the curb, she let her thoughts wander.

Since the dim rainy morning when she first stood on the platform at Waterloo and watched Devon busy himself with finding a shelter for little Beatrix and her nurse and struggle with the complexities of rescuing their luggage, she had felt, above the throng of the people in the station and the noises of arrival and departure, how differently London was to touch her imagination. Paris hung for her in a haze of delicate light. The glancing intelligence of the French mind remained for her like a shining crystal, which she had fingered with what she knew as the finest form of her curiosity. But even in the dull morning, with the fatigue of the crossing behind her and so little to shape the accent of her impressions, she was at once conscious of the dissemblances between this civilisation and the enrichment and penalty of the French civilisation. The very light in the dark sky was not as clear but deeper, not as glancing but more lasting, than the Paris light, as if it conserved reticences rather than exposed them. In the close, grimed houses

there was a quality which seemed to her so remote and so indifferent of appreciation that it gave them an air of incomparable isolation, and in the isolation itself there lurked the weight of greatness rather than of brilliancy.

Her impressions had deepened day by day; so penetratively that she had never been more conscious of reticences in herself, as if to be in a place where all the shadows had form and life deepened the outline of her own evanescence and made her receptivity more lasting. Mrs. Devon had chanced to be in London for the spring. It was a season she frequently spent there, at the most expensive of hotels, and occupied in a perpetuated series of engagements. With her head at its familiar angle above the high pearl collar about her throat and the bird-like motions of her pink and white hands, her appearance seemed to Olive more than ever indicative of all the absurd motions of her mind. Yet her small glancing look, as it rested on Olive's deepened beauty, had its power of penetration. The extreme limitation of her range, Olive sometimes thought, enabled her to see the single point she got with perfect exactness. Her sole comment was that her daughter-in-law had evidently mastered a new arrangement of her hair; but she set to work, with complete willingness and good humour, to find them a little house, for the next two months, and through the time when Devon could excusably say he was occupied with his competitive schemes, between London and Paris.

What was more, she had secured for them, by means of her small machinery—a word dropped here and there at a lunch table, and a telephone message or two—a house which, as Olive admitted, could not

have shown more fully the signs of her particular form of astuteness. The Devons needed, as she insisted, something much more serious in tone than she would have needed herself, and what had determined her selection was that the house in Hill street was small, quiet and grave. Its air of compactness had character, the furniture was of a charming Adam, the nursery for Beatrix was light and the servants were responsible. She showed in such matters the same minute efficiency which she showed in the innumerable fittings at her dressmakers'. She accepted Devon's gratitude for these services with the same air of puzzled wonder with which she accepted Olive's sharp comments of approval or disapproval. What had evidently seized her fugitive attention was the baby, who in the last months had developed a pale gold prettiness, the image of her own. It was evidently, as Devon said, not the child's increasing personality or her clinging charm which impressed themselves on her glancing consciousness, so much as her own potentialities in the position of a grandmother. It had renewed her sense of youth to be told how incredibly young she looked to be in such a relation; and where she had at first regarded Beatrix's existence as an indelicate reminder and had invented pet names to avoid the title of grandmother, she now insisted on it with persistency, took Beatrix to drive with her every day, and compounded from their devoted relation a philosophy to dispose of all her sentimental disasters.

Olive sometimes looked at them together, with so slight a seeming separation of any of the vitality of experience between them, and wondered why she was so unable to get from the touch of the child's head,

which rested so closely against Mrs. Devon's laces and silver foxes, any clarifying of her own turbulent uncertainties. Devon's constant preoccupation for Beatrix's care was more comprehensible to her than the complete dependence he felt on her existence. With her latent conviction that she was being outdone in something which was by right her due, she tried, several times, to sit in the evening by the nursery fire and to hold between her own the pink fragrant hands, warm from their bath, in a determination to blow her feeling into a flame. But her mind was too restless and her patience too thin; and she laid Beatrix back in her bed, again and again, with her rapid frown. The child seemed to her too plainly contradictory. She felt her to be the living sign of her impulse, which had long since evaporated—not for Devon, but for the fulfilment of rules of experience which Father Ames had tried to teach her; and what she was more conscious of than anything else was the reactive sense of her own failure.

It had been easily in accordance with Devon's plans that they should arrange to spend the spring in London; at least he had so perfectly acquiesced, when she made the suggestion, that she had been surprised at the dry smile with which he greeted her assumption that he wanted to go.

"I do it so well now," he said, absently, "that you don't question my complete participation; and of course you're right. I want to go," his eyes rose for one of their rapid looks at her, "because you want to."

They had been sitting at dinner, with the table drawn to the fire, on a rainy March night when the comfort of the little apartment in the rue Pierre Charron had

ASCENT

seemed more than usually warm and full of charm. But as soon as the words had left his lips, it had been evident from Devon's face that in Olive's uncontrollable movement of vexation, he had discerned the fact that he had passed a milestone. It was for the first time apparent that his feeling for her was beginning to irritate her. Where before she had brushed by it, with the security of indifference, she had none the less counted and insisted on its tribute. She had dropped her fork to her plate; and something in the ring it made sent his thoughts back, no less than hers, in the flash of an instant, to her irritation with her father, at Ware, on the evening they had told him of their engagement.

His indissoluble reticence quivered for a moment beneath the touch of the recollection, and then gave way.

"Do you mean always to dispose of me; or perhaps not even that—to cease to notice me?"

"I don't understand what you mean," she had broken in impatiently.

"You're tired, my dear child, and that makes you less astute than usual." He rose and threw down his napkin. The look he bent on her was charged with a quality beyond her definition. "You have completely the upper hand. You've every advantage. But there's one thing—don't mistake my acquiescence for carelessness! It's taken all my strength, you know—not my weakness—to accept the things you've imposed on me."

"I know it's impossible for you to explain why I do or don't do things . . ." she began, but he cut her short.

"Come, Olive, you are less astute than usual! You know, if you know anything, that if I didn't so perfectly

understand you, I shouldn't bank all my future on it." Their eyes for a moment retraced, in their quick give and take, the stages of the recent weeks, and she felt her look waver. "I could explain to you everything, even yourself," he ended, with his brevity unusually sharp; then he drew out his watch. "I shan't finish dinner—I'm off. They're doing some new thing of Ravel's at the Comique. . . ."

As her gaze passed over the movement of the crowds and up to the afternoon sky, she vividly relived the reaction of that moment, when he had closed the door and left her, with the candles and flowers and the luxury of their dinner so suddenly gone. She had wondered then, as she wondered now, whether all the stages of her development were to come to her not by growth but by these hard contradictions. She knew that, in the last months, her thoughts had become less sensitive. The conviction that her character was moulding into lines less and less malleable increased in her almost daily. Outwardly she felt herself little changed. Her dominance was even quicker, in the immediacy of its effect, and the broadening of her contacts had given it more point and form. But she had the persistent sense that, even in the brilliancy of her weeks in France, she had had a less fine receptivity than in the period when she had been so eager to be swayed and influenced by Father Ames; and that to him she had brought something less susceptible and sincere than even the crudity of her girlhood.

It was not Rivaudière's loss which she had most felt, in the chill of the afternoon at Fontainebleau which had so clearly terminated their possibilities of feeling. Even then, and in the empty silence in which they had driven

back to town, she had realised that one of the torments of her incapacity was that she could not experience the wrench or depletion of a live regret, in the knowledge that their relation was as plainly ended as if it had been struck a blow. But she had had a humiliating consciousness that she was hurt, less intact and less secure and with her loveliness tarnished. What was slipping from her was all the quickness of differentiation, the stimulation of taste and the refinement of pleasure, which Rivaudière had carried so like a waving banner. She had lost in him something beyond himself; and in his complete incapacity to comprehend her, his perfect refusal to be involved in any experiment of feeling except a real one, she felt herself more deeply degraded than she could have believed degradation possible. They met a few times more in Paris, for his care for appearances was as natural to him as his breathing; but the flawlessness of his politeness, his easy inclusion of Devon and his sudden engagement to play polo at Biarritz, lay like a scar on the fine tissue of her mind. She turned from it as instinctively as she turned from her memories of Father Ames, and with a humiliation almost as deep.

Her innate response to the stimulation of what was new to her sprang to life, however, in her first days in London. With the same pliancy with which she had responded to the touch of Paris, she felt herself fall into the key of her present surroundings. Her natural astuteness marked for her the limits of how far this should be apparent and placed the accent of sophistication on her reticences and refusals; but something in the quick, surface dealing with the human exemplification, rather than with the French criticism

and comment, was of peculiar appeal to her at the moment. Mrs. Devon was always ready with a suggestion or an invitation, or had someone especially in mind whom it would amuse to see her. Olive noted that her mother-in-law had long since given up any attempt to deal with her except on the basis of how she affected other people, as if she were a curiosity to be produced for an inspection which need never be repeated. She was ready enough to live these agitated days, conscious everywhere either of admiration or of the resentment which always indicated, in her opinion, the same tribute, to absorb herself in the multiplicity of her engagements, in driving out to Hurlingham or in the selection of her summer frocks. Sometimes, when she stood before a picture, with Mrs. Devon's ceaseless readiness of comment beside her and an eye always alert to see who composed the crowd of a vanishing day, she reminded herself that she was not seeing what was in front of her; that it was weeks since she had used her eyes, weeks since she had read, and that music struck her eardrums and no further. If she caught sight of herself, outlined against other figures, her appearance itself seemed written over with the progress of these processes. Her beauty had a stronger accent. In spite of her maintenance of its delicacy, it was heavier in outline and coarser in effect; with the same coarsening, she sometimes told herself, with one of her sharp turns of recognition, that one saw in the progression of narcotism.

She had agreed to be at home by four if she wanted to join Devon and his mother, who were driving out in Mrs. Devon's motor to see the tennis at Wimbledon.

But her reflections had left her listless, and with her more and more constant touch of nervous irritability she watched the little clock in front of her pass the hour and then called to the chauffeur the Hill street address.

She was indeterminately aware that the parlour-maid, at the door, looked at her with an odd suggestion of both evasion and curiosity, as she murmured that tea was in the drawing room. Olive went up the stairs and opened the door on the small brownish room, with the afternoon sun striking through the long windows and lighting the clusters of flowering plants and the yellow inlay of the old brown furniture. A man was standing on the hearth rug, in evident expectation of her entrance. He threw down his cigarette and turned, as she closed the door; and she saw that it was Passmore.

It was immediate to her that his errand was beyond the need, for the instant, of any comment. His single look, which he maintained and deepened, caught her as firmly as a grasp with its significances. She had become familiar enough with his face, in the illustrations of papers, in public, across the House, and last night at dinner and to-day at lunch; but what the baldness of his quick smile revealed was something far more, as the criticism of life she had inherited could not deny, than any temporary and personal purpose. He was representative, she felt, the perfect example of a mind with power and without imagination, which used fineness and never responded to it. In the rawness of his assurance and the security with which he stood, watching in her face the effect of his sudden presence, she could feel all that had made him and all that might

ASCENT

at any second unmake him. It shot through her mind that, in her search for feeling and her eager responsiveness to the surface stimulus, she had become almost imitatively like the people who influenced her; and she wondered, with her wonder sustained for a long second, if she were to become like Passmore.

"You see, my dear Mrs. Devon," he broke the silence easily, "I wanted to belie as soon as possible the theory that we shouldn't again meet; and on my way from my meeting I stopped, to see if your plans had changed with your husband's. . . ."

Olive remained where she had paused, with her arm over the back of one of the chairs by the hearth. The futility of any of the usual expressions and comments struck her so completely that for a moment she did not speak.

"My plans—changed? I don't understand!" she said briefly.

"Ah, then I'm glad I waited! Your servants said you'd shortly be in, and so I made up my mind to give you at least a second or two to arrive before I left. Oddly enough, when I stopped for an instant at my wife's bazaar for whatever it was, the first person I ran across was your charming mother-in-law; and she told me, in a distracted way, this news which I seem to be the first to bring you."

Olive's eyebrows lifted a little. "Well?" she asked.

"It appears that your father-in-law's very ill—they've had two or three cables, all in a rush; and your mother-in-law and your husband are sailing instantly, at dawn to-morrow, or something like that, to join him. Mrs. Devon was quite delightful in wanting to share with me the confidences of her life and to tell me why

ASCENT

she must go to her husband, whether he wanted her or no! But I hadn't, unfortunately, the time. I merely said I hoped it didn't mean you'd also go; and she said she thought certainly not, and flew off to make her arrangements. They'll be here in a moment, probably, all excitement and activity; meanwhile I wanted, for just a second, to see you. . . ."

The step he had taken nearer her was his sole motion; yet under his glance she felt, above the rapid whirl of her thoughts, the closer pressure of his insistence. "I hope," he pursued, "that it's definite that you won't go?"

She answered him immediately. "No. I shan't go."

As their silence again fell, something made her conscious that her look was giving him a response more definite than her words. Her head had gradually lifted, with its backward tilt emphasising the depth of her eyes and the firmness of her chin. She knew that the expression with which she met his was as beyond resentment and beyond any insistence on his disregard of conformities, as she knew the tension of the few seconds behind them. She had, she felt, a smile lighter than his own, of a deeper derision, and at a wreckage of things he couldn't measure. It evidently caught his attention for a quick second. She could see him note it, with a touch of incomprehension, and then return to the simplicity of his usual judgments; and he opened the door and left her, with his voice breaking, in the hall and in earshot of the waiting parlour-maid, into expressions of regret that they had been put to all this worry and confusion.

XXIV

OLIVE was still standing with her arm across the chair and her eyes set on the sensitive designs of the shifting sunlight on the floor when, a few moments later, Devon came in.

Even with her attention so heavily concentrated at a sole point, she saw at once the gravity of the line of preoccupation drawn between his eyes. He dropped into the armchair at the farther side of the fire, with a breath of fatigue.

"Heavens, that was luck—but I've done it! Mother hasn't stopped here, on her way to Claridge's, to tell you? We're off, she and I, from Liverpool to-morrow. By the merest chance I got two cabins and put all our arrangements through before the offices closed. I had a cable just after you'd left for your lunch, and I rang her up and found she'd had two, within the hour. Father's gravely ill. We must face it clearly that the facts are all against him. A bad bronchial pneumonia—and at sixty-eight, and with his habits of neglecting himself . . ."

He seemed finally to notice her, and the face he turned to her softened.

"I knew you'd understand that I had to decide it instantly. If all goes well, I can be back here, and finish up my work in Paris, within three weeks or so; if it doesn't—that must take care of itself. There wasn't time to talk it over with you. But I felt of course that you wouldn't want to go. . . ."

She murmured how sorry she was, and how desirous

to help him, how hard it seemed, with the final days of the competition at hand and with all his plans so adjusted. But he caught her up.

"Oh, I can think of nothing but that wretched uncomfortable little house, strewn with jades and dust. It was the Wickford doctor who evidently insisted on telegraphing; and I've cabled the two best specialists I could think of to go on from New York, immediately. . . It's heavily on my mind that I've not been square about it—not right. I know him so well—I know all his helplessnesses and his shyness; and yet I've been off for months, living my own life——"

"You've scarcely been doing that," she interrupted him with one of her sudden turns. "It's been mine."

His smile caught her eyes. "Well, it's the same thing. I've had my ideas, vague as they've seemed; and I've been set on following them through to an end. . . . And now this comes—!" His quizzical look deepened. "I really should have waited till the Saturday boat, so as to make things more secure for your comfort, if mother hadn't insisted on rushing off to-morrow. Nothing will deter her. She's bent on a scene, on some drama of reconciliation; and you can guess what that will mean! It's an emotional possibility which stirs all her imagination . . . I think the best thing you can do, if you will, is to go to her now and let her unburden herself of all the feeling which she'll have accumulated since I left her."

He had risen, as he glanced at his watch, and coming over to her he laid his hands on her shoulders. "You'll be all right?" was all he said. But his look at her penetrated like a swiftly flung light amongst the shadows in her mind.

She felt herself sway uncertainly, with her will suddenly dissolved in a complete fatigue. It seemed impossible for her to frame any words.

Devon held his glance on her. "Of course I know how safe you are here, and I'll leave everything in order for you at the bank. And there are so many people to do things for you and give you a good time. It's only my absurd idea about you, always, you know!" His smile showed again. "For all your seeming confidence and independence, you've something impending—I'm always imagining—poised over you, like a poised fate. . . ."

She was conscious, with her rarely stirred prehensiveness, that he meant it to be the instant of their good-bye. For a second the desire to make him some sign held her forcibly; then her disbelief in even her own pain reasserted itself, and she felt the moment pass.

"The car's still waiting, I suppose?" she said. "Then I'll go to your mother at once."

They left the next morning. As the train pulled out from the Euston platform, and with her last vision of Mrs. Devon's small agitated hand, waving in the various directions of the friends who had come to see her off, and of Devon's preoccupied face, over her shoulder, Olive had the sharpest sense of the closure of a stage of her existence. On her return to the house in Hill street, its silence, on the sunny morning, after the constant stir of trunks and messengers, seemed to her symbolic. Beatrix was in the park with her nurse; the regularity of her small hours never impinged, in any case, on Olive's attention, and she sat down at her desk, in the drawing room, to answer a few notes and

ASCENT

rearrange some of her engagements, in view of Devon's departure, with a sudden drop of relaxation. But as she looked across the room, to where Passmore had stood for their few moments' exchange, she felt her expression harden into fixity. Her pen fell from her fingers. In the long concentration in which she stared at the empty space which he had so peopled, she measured, for the first time, her change of balance. In her decisive determination for acquirement, she saw that she was prepared to yield the integrity of her will to his management. She felt all the irony of the thought that this should be the most difficult form of her surrender. No control she had ever put on herself was harder than this consent to nullify her own choice and her own judgments. Yet she understood that it was only by an acquiescence such as a person of his type exacted that she could penetrate and possess the realities most people knew and of which she was still so ignorant. In the stillness of the house, with the low murmur of the streets coming through the open windows and the room so quiet that she heard the faint stir of the flowers on the table beside her in the draught, the tick of the little clock on the desk caught her half conscious attention. She dropped her eyes to it. It was an old French one, scarcely more than the length of her hand, with delicate gold-bronze figures traced against the fawn-coloured marble. It had one day caught Devon's interest, in one of the old shops he frequented, and he had brought it home to her, with one of his vague comments and his air of waiting to see her pleasure. He had given her everything he had ever offered her in just this way, she recalled—the various things he had made special gifts in the house in New York, her furs, her rings, all

showing the mark of his exigent taste. His look, as he put them in her hands, seemed to her always to have contained an element of half amused doubt; not so much, she could have fancied, as to whether the gift were equal to her but equal to his feeling for her. . . . But the sound of the hurried hands carried her thought beyond these facts. She was across the intervening spaces, as she followed the thread of recollection, and back beside her grandfather's bed at Ware, with the little china clock making its fatuous sound on the mantel and his dim deep gaze set on her with the peculiar intensity of the moment. Time, it seemed to her, had suddenly flung about her again its network of enclosure. The little she had done and had, the pervasive restlessness of her hope, the nervousness of an aspiration which was all individual, drew with a sharp stroke across her stretched perceptions, like the bow of a violin which emitted no sound. . . .

She was fully expectant of a message from Passmore, during the day. Yet she had no word from him until the middle of the following week. One afternoon in Bond street, his tall figure suddenly detached itself from the crowd, as he paused to speak to a man who had arrested him; and the instant her eyes lit on him she realised how potently the memory of their interview lay in her mind and how keenly she was keyed to the expectation of what his next sign to her would be. She realised something more. He turned deliberately, as her car was held by the traffic, and bowed to her. Even across the distance between them, his manner seemed to her charged with definiteness and decision; and in a flash there was apparent to her the fact that his coarseness was only the coarser for having its inflexions. The

ASCENT

courtesy of his smile carried an assumption which no broader statement could have equalled; and his postponement of an attempt to see her had, in the light of her growing knowledge of him, a sudden implication that in the delay he was only giving her time to realise the assurance of facts as to whose ultimacy he felt no doubt.

When she got back to Hill street she found that he had already telephoned a message for her, as if their mute interchange had decided him. He would call for her in his car early the next afternoon, the message ran, to run her out to the country for tea, if she could arrange to be free. As the maid recited the phrase, Olive's smile rose at the final words. Their careful courtesy, she thought, could not impose on her cynicism. He would continue to make his concessions to appearance perfect; but he would not for a moment let her forget the fact that they were to impress the servants rather than to placate her. She was drawing off her gloves in front of her dressing table, as the woman spoke, and she caught in her mirror the reflection of her eyes. Something in them held her. She saw behind her the accustomed room, the whiteness of the curtains, the maid's face over her shoulder and the gold-topped bottles and boxes in front of her. Yet all the security of habit and the protection of the presuppositions in which she had lived seemed suddenly annihilated by his complete confidence in her acquiescence. She was as conscious as if she had traced the lines connecting them that it was this sense which made her fling down her gloves and say: "Yes—telephone Sir Francis Passmore that I can arrange to be disengaged at three o'clock."

The afternoon had turned hazy and softer than the sunlight when Passmore, at the door of the little Inn at Horsham, had given her a cushion and put a rug about her knees for the drive home. He had insisted on stopping in the long village street, with the closed house fronts facing them with the English imperturbability, and going into the deserted parlour of the Inn for tea, so as not to have the bother, as he put it, of being roped behind the great iron gates which gave so magnificently on the more open high-road.

"The trouble with me is, you see, that I'm unconcealable," he had exclaimed tartly. "Of course Isabel Bourdas would say that most of the time I like it; but on this occasion it would probably mean that we were let in for a huge family gathering of Godlys, who are always, you know, here. Oh, they'll discover me, even in this place; but not until it's too late to annoy us. So if you don't mind execrable teacake . . ."

The words drew from Olive the same smile she had met him with, at her door. She had the sense that she was as removed from him as she felt the wrapping of her dark veils to remove her; yet something revealed to her that their separation itself was part of the planning of his astuteness. He had driven her out in an open motor, with his chauffeur behind them, in reach of every word. Their talk across the stolid round table of the little parlour might have taken place before a crowd. Passmore had touched lightly on one or two people she knew, on her portrait, which was just on exhibition, by a clever young friend of Devon's—"your husband's got an eye, it appears; do you know it? Terence Bourdas says he has the best natural taste he knows . . . they've met over prints, it

seems;" on the inaccuracies in the newest book of historical gossip, and on some of the things which, in America, had impressed him extraordinarily when he was there as special envoy. "You're an amazing people, aren't you? Admirable, serious . . . that's as I saw you, with purpose, fairness and uplift in everything you do! I don't at all make you out as hard-hearted or vain or selfish, but just as very middle-class. You're not young, you're raw. Youth knows so much by instinct—France is eternally young; and even your vices seemed to me so sadly inefficient. The aristocratic sins are the worst, you know. . . ." And he passed on to speak of a young General who had just gone out to try his hand at the Turkish situation and of what he hoped might shape itself as a policy at a forth-coming Council of Ambassadors at the Hague. She felt the flattery of his easy allusions, but he never for a moment flattered her. Her grandfather had given her the habit of a political curiosity and of political opinions; but when she questioned Passmore or expressed a view, he put her easily aside. Not only the assurance of a habit of defence but also his personal computation of her seemed to bar the way, with complete definiteness, to the entrance of any note which he did not determine; and under her consciousness of his relegation of her she had felt her flush rise, beneath the folds of gauze which covered her face.

His conveyances to her had been so entirely compounded of implications that she was alive to the light change in his manner, as he took his place beside her for the drive back to town. His sudden observance concerning her comfort had struck her; and his glance, as she caught it through her veil, had a deeper commit-

ment. For the first miles he was silent. Every now and then, with a gesture the man behind them must miss, he drew up her rug and asked her if she were tired. His voice had none of the accent of solicitude, but of an intimacy the closer in that it was so terse; and she was not surprised when, as the houses began to gather in the first suburbs, he spoke abruptly and with a definite change of tone.

"One wonders, you know, what all you Americans—since we've been speaking of you—get out of life. Most of you are so unwilling to involve yourselves, and above all in the human relations. You, for instance,—you're all the curiosity of your mind; where if you were of an older race, you'd realise that there's a different—shall we say empiricism?"

She had a defensive determination to draw his words back to their widest issues.

"Don't forget that we've in America our own methods, as well as you," she spoke uncertainly. "And even if we've only the illusion of them, at least we've codified them into a creed!"

"But you've codified them! And a codified illusion—great heaven, how hideous! Strange, though, that with all your instinct to make codes you never see a fact." He turned with deliberation, in his seat, to face her fully. "You, for instance,—you don't see a fact."

"I see what I consent to see," she said clearly; the play of his words was so perfectly indirect that at one moment she felt she must have mistaken all his insinuations, and at the next that they were the surest point of his method.

"Then you miss—and of course you know it—all the existence of existence. How dull it would be, to live

only by one's dull determinations! As if it rested with you!" He gave a brief glance, to measure the attention of the man over his shoulder. "But of course it does, you know!"

She met him for a full instant. "Ah, but it doesn't." His smile at her suddenly deepened.

"That's charming of you! You've a largeness of generosity, a magnificence—what is really an imperial quality."

Olive's face darkened in one of its ready changes. "Yes—in the terms of my fate, I sometimes think I have."

Passmore laughed. "Possibly it sounds better to call it fate!"

She felt herself caught by an irresistible impulse for frankness, and she turned sharply on him. "Do you see nothing but what's visible—nothing but what you can touch?" she broke out.

"Nothing! I've found, I admit, that it's the only way which pays." His smile held for an instant more, and then his voice fell into its former key. "And here's London upon us. In a moment we'll be in the worst of crowds. You've indeed been delightful to come. You're dining at Brough House to-morrow, aren't you? So, by chance, am I. Just what they call a family party, the Duke told me; what a relief after the mob one generally finds there! But the Duchess, who's of course a dear, is never happy unless she's in Piccadilly. . . ."

THE force of Passmore's tone and its concentration, beneath its practised fluency, caught Olive again when she faced him, across the dinner table at Brough House, the next evening. In the intervening hours she had gone ceaselessly over the few sentences of their conversation, its careful attenuations and its sudden flares of significance. She felt the confusion which his confidence inspired. It was difficult for her to trace the convergence between his rapidity of touch, his easy relegations, and the warmth which so evidently generated them. Her own realism, as she was fully conscious, was as intact in its operations as his. She saw him without the slightest illusion to soften his image. His mind seemed to her totally without the embroidery and bloom of comment and bare of any grace of appreciation, and solely a secure instrument for dealing with his own universe. With the increasing obsession of her curiosity as to such methods, she had relived each second of their afternoon together. The sense that her nature was exposed to him—that because of his own particular qualities he was able to divine her insecurity, her inhibitions, her lack of any physical prescience and the uncertainty of her audacities, had already given her a belief in the fatality of her concessions to him; and she was conscious of a shock of actuality when, as she faced him between the high branched candelabra and over the wide gold *épergnes*, she heard his voice fall again into

the same kind of phrase which was so vividly running in her thoughts.

Every now and then, from her place beside the Duke, she caught Passmore's glance. There lay in it a conviction rather than a message, something evidently allied to their interchange of the day before, and at moments she felt herself slight and uncertain under its import. He was talking constantly, with the ease of his intimacy in the house; and it appeared to her not the smallest of his capacities that he could so perfectly maintain the flow of his comment, his tart friendly give and take with Lord Terence, his affectionate intolerance of the Duchess and his attention to the Duke, and combine with these an implication to herself, so private yet so definite that her thin shoulders straightened whenever she caught the turn of his head or the motion of his hands.

The Duchess had for once belied her reputation, and there was gathered about the table only the always large family group,—young Lord and Lady Harringford, who were up from the country, the Duke's secretary, and Terence and Isabel Bourdas. Olive had measured the implied flattery of this inclusion—to cheer her up, as Lady Isabel put it, until she heard better news from Devon and her mother-in-law—as carefully as she had measured the effect of her black lace against the magnificent dull gilt of the panelling behind her, the slimness of her silvery shoes and the delicacy of the diamonds in her hair. She was aware that Passmore not only computed these facts, but that her beauty was enhanced for him because of Isabel's admission of her to so warm a friendliness. She felt that throughout the dinner she managed to maintain

her own tone, in her responses to the old Duke and in her reserves with the Duchess, in spite of the pressure on her nerves of Passmore's look. Her alert distrustfulness divined that there was only one direction from which any question lit on the changes of her face. Once she caught Isabel Bourdas' eyes; and the lack of any repetition of the glance warned her as rapidly as Passmore's insistent care to defer to the raillery of Isabel's tone with him.

She was too experienced, by now, to dispose of this attitude by assuming it to be a tribute. She knew she could deal more securely with the Duchess's unconcealed suspicion of anyone who was capable of enjoying the inconvenience and extravagance of displacement, than she could deal with the cordiality of Isabel's assurances. She could not clarify the causes of such a kindness; and when Isabel had for the final time assured her mother and sister-in-law that they were dull and unimaginative and that it took a modern young creature like Mrs. Devon to wake them up, and then turned to her, to ask if she would care to see the Raphael, she had acquiesced readily, with a sense that their moments alone might elucidate her uncertainty for her.

They had broken up the informal group in one of the small drawing rooms, and Olive had followed Isabel down the corridors to the farthest west end of the house, returning every now and then the brief observations Isabel made over her shoulder.

"It's in the chapel, you know. It has indeed been there ever since we've existed. Sometimes father talks of moving it, and perhaps Bobby and Minnie may, one of these days—or one of their Bobbies and Minnies!

Certainly they must give up either Trant or this, if taxation goes on at this pace. But thank heaven for the moment it's here . . . if you can make it out!"

She opened a low door, and Olive passed after her into a sudden darkness. All she could discern, in the gloom, was the host lamp, the gleam of gold on the wall behind it, and the dim outline of the worn red velvet chairs and stools. Isabel touched an electric switch, and before them, over the altar, there leapt into radiance the clear face of a rapturous St. Catherine. It was as fresh in its purity as the green of the palm on her shoulder and the deep blues and reds of the robe which fell to her bare feet. The lighting of the chapel was concentrated on the painting, and thin in itself—an evidently grudging concession to the darkness of the surrounding buildings; but Olive's dramatic sense instantly seized on the beauty of this seclusion. She thought of the artistocracy of an attitude which could keep so inimitable a treasure here, for the household alone, reducing it to its contributive part in the appurtenances of ritual. Nothing had ever so illustrated to her the English integrity and the Catholic preoccupation, or the penetration of private faith into every gesture of mind, habit and taste.

It seemed to her like a reply to her thoughts that Isabel had dropped to her knees, on one of the velvet stools, with her eyes set before her and her hands clasped. She had thrown her lace scarf over her head; and in her evening dress, with her arms and neck bare, she added the final note to Olive's sense of the values of the scene. For an instant Olive saw how perfectly she herself could imitate what she felt to be so picturesque a gesture; but an unaccustomed hesitation held her

motionless. She felt suddenly separate and alien, with an invisible hand defining for her a line beyond which, for reasons she did not stop to measure, she could not pass.

Isabel rose after a moment.

"Poor Robert," she suddenly said, in a low voice—"he did so adore her! When he was a tiny creature, he'd come in here to stare at her—and we'd find him, lost to the world. I say Robert now; one thinks of him as if he were dead. I wonder so much how he's taking this matter of Ernestine. She died, you know, four days ago, and he was given permission to be with her at the end. He loved her so passionately; she always had a flash of St. Catherine's spirit, he used to say. Now, heaven knows where he is—here, within a few miles of us, perhaps, or gone back. Somehow it's worse than death itself, this inexorable separation."

She turned to switch off the light; and in the semi-darkness, and in a sudden silence, with a motion which was abrupt and full of hesitancy she laid her hand on Olive's arm. There was no warmth in the action; Olive's strained nerves were conscious at once of its absence. She felt rather the determination it betrayed of Isabel's effort to overcome a withdrawal which had the directness of instinct. Its definition was of facts too deep for her to name them; but she was conscious that as they passed out to the corridor, her flush had swept from her neck up to her forehead.

The others had risen, in preparation for departure, when Isabel and Olive rejoined them. Passmore, indeed, had said his good night and was clearly lingering as they entered.

"I know what you are, Isabel, when you have the

ASCENT

Raphael on your mind, and I was almost hopeless! Since Mrs. Devon's not got her husband here, perhaps she'll let me take her in my car to the Ormsby's—you're going, Mrs. Devon? Yes?"

Isabel answered him instantly. "And so am I. No, mother, I think I shall, after all; and you, Minnie, of course? Mrs. Devon's too tired? Then, my dear child, we'll drop you in Hill street as we go by, and go on with Francis. It's too bad, but you must sometime see their ballroom lit; and they are having Casals to play, aren't they?"

Olive had passed into the outer hall, with the even sound of Isabel's voice behind her. Lady Harringford was delaying, as she parted from her mother-in-law; and for an instant she found herself alone, in front of the gilt mirrors and at the foot of the curved stairs, with Passmore.

He signed to the footman who held his coat to wait, and bending towards her he spoke in a low tone.

"I leave town to-morrow, you know; I cross for the meeting at Brussels. Saturday night—in three days—I shall be in Paris, at my flat there, alone for the week-end. How singularly nice if you ran over!"

She met in silence the complete lack of concealment in the declaration of his look, and he pursued:

"53, avenue Montaigne; you'll remember? I'll be there late Saturday; perhaps you'll dine with me? What's your hotel there—the Crillon? You'll find my man waiting there for you with a message, any time you arrive." His quick glance took in the opening of the door behind them, for Isabel and Lady Harringford. "And remember," his smile just showed, "that at the Crillon my name's Parker!"

ASCENT

She was singularly silent as they drove through the streets, which had already the stillness of the late evening; and she had only the briefest word for Lady Harringford and Isabel, at her door, and the briefest good night for Passmore. They must forgive her, she said; she was really tired out.

Her indecision lay on her thoughts like a heavy fog. All night she saw nothing but this mist, in which she seemed to toss without direction. She did not attempt to predict to herself her determination; but her caustic honesty recognised that she grasped with relief at the fact that it was only Wednesday night, and that hours intervened when her logic of action might clear itself.

In the morning she was conscious of a sudden dependence on her normal routine. She interviewed the servants, saw Beatrix, and set out to keep an appointment at her dressmakers'. At times the weight of her preoccupation gave her a sensation of acute physical exhaustion, and she resolutely tried to lose herself in the details of the close scented fitting rooms, the hurrying messengers, with their arms full of lace and tulle, and the stimulus to her beauty of a more expert treatment than it had ever received.

As she walked down the street, just at noon, some submerged instinct stirred in her, and she turned in between the green railings of the Farm street church. A moment later she was in the dim interior. Following the faint thread of her impulse, she walked down the aisle to the farthest end and dropped on her knees before the altar of the Virgin. Her first reflection was that it was a stupidity of accident that the church was empty and that there should be no one to see her as

ASCENT

she knelt, in her soft dress and with all her small appurtenances—her sunshade, the gold bag on her arm, the sables on her shoulders and the flowers at her waist. Then her thought rose with her eyes and fastened on the cool removed white figure. She was too trained in her realism, she recognised, to believe that she could find any decision in an invisible and intangible world. Yet suddenly, as she gazed in front of her, the tangle of her situation was cleared. If she went to Paris to meet Passmore, she knew, with her instinctive definiteness, that her action would lack some accent to give it salience. With a rapid combination of thoughts, she saw what that accent ought to be. She was conscious that, deep in her shrewd judgment, lay the presupposition that she must extract from the situation all she could, in order to make its crudity worth while. For a few moments more her mind worked at avenues of possibility. Then, with a gesture of decision, she took from her belt the orchids Passmore had sent her and laid them on the ground before the statue, as she began to pray; as if, she thought, with the habitual twist of her cynicism, she laid them before Ames. . . .

XXVI

THE House established by the Carmelites near Reading resembled, as far as Olive's eyes could penetrate beyond its closed stone wall, one of the larger houses of the countryside. Yet even the glare of its modern brick had a quality of withdrawal. Its silence, as the little cab she had found to bring her the two miles drive from the station drew up at the entrance, was at once apparent; and the long echoes of the bell set in the high gate trembled through the sunshine and rose to the dark cross, set over the gables and drawn in outline against the morning sky.

Olive turned and looked across the road, beyond the drowsing horse whose driver she had ordered to wait for her. The fields quivered with light in the noon heat. They were already changing to a deeper gold, and the leaves had the darker green of summer. The sweetness of the honeysuckle on the wall drifted to her nostrils like the odour of the month, and above the elms which bordered the road she watched a bird wheel and drop, and rise into the opalescent light, scarcely conscious that her attention was fixed by such details.

It was vaguely present to her that ever since her decision had formed itself in her mind, twenty-four hours before, she had felt the sudden stimulus to her senses and the finer quality in her thought which any impact with Ames had always evoked in her. The same energy of response and the same heightened sense of vitality had animated her when, late the afternoon before, she had finally succeeded in seeing the Arch-

bishop of Stoke. Her note, on her card, had emphasised the extreme urgency of a word with him; and face to face with him, in his study, with the glow of his robe outlined against the dark bookcases and his closed expression confronting her, she had been conscious that some insistence carried, in her look and her voice, which brought a visible conviction to even the habituated reticences of his mind. Her hands had been clasped on the arm of her chair as she spoke. It was of primary importance, she said, that she obtain permission to see Father Ames before he left for his return to Malaga—immediately; what steps should she take, and would he lend her his advice and support? She made the request only because it was imperative. She was not only one of his penitents, but his convert to the church; and on a matter concerning which only he could advise her, there hung the happiness of some of his dearest friends.

The Archbishop's face, as he listened, and though he was, in his secure conformity of expression, only the faintest image of his brother, had enough of the family quality to respond. Olive could see that he hesitated, and with his hesitation she felt the possibility of accomplishment. It was of course extremely unusual, he repeated, like a formula. Many people, she would understand, had wanted to see his brother, particularly at the time of the death of Sister Martha of the Cross; his old instructor in Scholastic Philosophy at Stonyhurst, for instance, and the Duke of Brough. They had broached the subject to him, and Lady Isabel had been, almost daily, to the palace, to learn at second hand how Ames was standing the shock of his sister's death. But she had never directly suggested seeing

him. It was plain enough to them, her interlocutor concluded, that reminders of his life in the world were not what, in this situation or in any conceivable one, he wanted.

Olive had dropped her eyes, under the implication; but a second later all she was conscious of was that her confusion had inevitably added to her beauty. It was evident to her that her only chance to succeed was an emotional one, and she had resolutely used it. Her only additional word was that Father Ames himself would be the first to recognise the validity of her claim, which was a claim to his Christian charity, and for succour in the cruelest of situations; and she had left the house with an affable note from the Archbishop to the Superior in charge in London, and another to the head of the Reading House, where Father Ames had been permitted to stay during the last days of his sister's life and her funeral.

The first of these, when she had presented herself in the evening at the door of the chief house of the Order in London, she had found to be fortunately away. It left her free to deal with an inferior, in temporary authority, but less insistent, so she understood from the air of the monk to whom she talked, than his superior would have been; and she was given an additional word of recommendation and instructions how to reach the house at Reading. There was nothing more to be done until, in the morning, she could take the first train which would not get her to her destination too early. But the rapid movement of her mind was such that every act seemed concerted with its larger activity. She arrived at Hill Street, late and tired out, and flung herself on her sofa

ASCENT

to stare before her, all evening, at the visible images which her thoughts took. The hours passed, and still she was too absorbed to undress. The night had brought to her mind its resemblance with the night before she had gone to Father Ames to announce to him her readiness for conversion, and when she had refused to sleep for fear of curtailing the stages of her initiation. Once or twice she dropped on her knees and tried to pray. She was keenly convinced that unless her participation were complete she would lose its full import. But the formula was always a constriction on her imagination; and as she murmured the words she kept vagrantly wondering whether, a day or so hence, she would be taking the lace dressing gown, which lay on her bed underneath her extended arms, with her to Paris. . . .

A footfall finally sounded on the flagging beyond the gate, and she turned, with an effort to brace herself. A lay brother slowly undid the door and confronted her. She was aware solely of his surprise, as he took her two letters and compared the luxury of her appearance with the deserted country road and the shabby cab. Visitors were allowed in the outer court, he said; and she could wait there while he went to the sub-Prior.

It was at least a step in the advancement of her purpose; and after a few moments in the unsheltered enclosure, with the sun blazing on the flowerless beds and the narrow brick walk which led to the house, Olive saw him return. He made no comment, but with the taciturnity of habit signed to her to follow him. They passed through a door and into a narrow hallway, and entered what appeared to her to be a little

parlour where, without an additional word, he left her.

Olive looked about her, with her instinctive measurement of a setting. The room had the extreme simplicity and cleanliness of all religious houses. It was furnished by the plainest wooden table, by one or two chairs and a few religious books on a deal shelf, and its high window was uncurtained. On the table was a statue of the Virgin, in the brightest colours, with a rosary of glass beads hanging from the clasped hands. Its presence seemed to accentuate the bareness, and she felt that she could never have imagined so harsh an ugliness. The door behind her had opened, during the uncertain moment of her effort to accustom herself to the strangeness of such an aspect; and she turned, with a rapid exclamation, and found herself face to face with Father Ames.

His own astonishment was evidently sufficient to hold him motionless. It pierced the reticences of his face and lightened the concentration in his eyes, as if the sight of her were both a memory and an anticipation so differing from the tenor of his accepted routine that his effort at readjustment was a visible one.

He had made, after his pause and without moving forward, a low murmur of recognition and greeting. But something arrested Olive, in her turn. Even the clarity of purpose in her mind was for a second unexpectedly impotent. His former force held her as actually as a clasp, and under the shock of its revision she was motionless. The flash of a second revealed in his face the power of his accomplished renunciation, and its concentration was so strong that she could feel, for an instant, only her own exclusion. Then, with a renewed effort of will, she tried to listen to him.

ASCENT

"My superior has granted me the privilege of seeing what I can do for you," he was evidently reiterating. "A day more, and I should have been gone. And in a few weeks, you understand, it would have been impossible! And how is my dear John?"

His smile had appeared, as he spoke, and he moved forward to the chair at one side of the table and signed to her to take the seat opposite. His voice had its familiar inflexion of friendliness; yet it was when he expressed so human a concern that the sense of his removal was for the first time complete to her. She obeyed his gesture and sat down, with her eyes still fixed on his face. She could not get beyond her consciousness of his distance. It rose before her not as a sudden severance but as a progressive atrophy of his personality. Something in his tone retraced the stages of his last months. It seemed to her as if the felicities and infelicities of living had ceased to be actual to him, had become wholly interior and existed only as phases of an artificial development, and had now finally died. It was more than detachment; it was a complete committal to the impositions of his faith.

"Oh, Father, yes! I had to insist on seeing you!" she finally spoke. "Don't tell me other souls have needed you too; you know I always need things worse than any one else! But am I really seeing you?"

"Perhaps not your idea of me," he had his former rapidity of return; "but the me who exists to-day and who has ceased, you see, to be of any use to his fellows outside of praying for them!"

"Praying! . . ." she ended her phrase with the exclamation. "And all of you—the great you—has really passed into prayer?"

ASCENT

"Very much more poorly so than it should have," he retorted. "When I see the holiness of some of the brothers, I wonder if ever in my useless life I've thought a thought which wasn't transitory and evanescent."

"And you're dead—wholly dead?" Her intensity of interest never wavered.

Father Ames smiled. "Or alive—wholly alive. All experience is relative—even your pagan philosophers grant that. I've the sole one which isn't relative, which is directly and measurably true. I have, with the help of God, a constant communication in prayer with my Maker."

Olive's lips opened without a sound and then set. Once the first effect of his presence was over, she was conscious of a rising impulse of revolt. The aridity of his responses seemed to her like the aridity of the room. There was no significance for her in the stripped walls, any more than there was poetry in his absorption. All she saw was a mechanical transference of personality into impersonality and an enforced negation; the differentiations of so susceptible a mind passing into the artificial resemblances and dissemblances of a community.

Her look changed with the return of her determination.

"Well, are you so secure in this achievement of a paradise that you have forgotten those of us who are suffering and struggling? . . ." Her voice broke on the words, and she bent forward, across the table. "Oh, Father, I am in trouble, terrible trouble; and if you won't advise me, won't save me, I'm lost!"

"Indeed, my child, I am deeply sorry;" Father

Ames's tone had the quality of his glance. "I divined, of course, that something must threaten you, the moment I heard you had obtained permission to come. John—he's all right?"

"Oh, John!" She caught herself. "John's all right; he's on his way to America, and he's sure of himself, sure of life—he's everything safe. John! Can't you help me for myself," her voice wavered again, "and not for John?"

Father Ames's eyes searched hers. "And have you been to your confessor?"

"My confessor!" She spoke with the same exasperation of feeling. "I've no director. I've not been to communion for months. My faith—oh, let us not beg the question, Father! You know as well as I do what—and in whom—my faith has always been. . . ."

The immunity of his expression perfectly held. His only response, for the next second, was to stretch out his hand and draw from the feet of the statue of the Virgin, on the table between them, the long gloves she had flung down. He folded them and laid them at her elbow before he spoke.

"I repeat that I'm exceedingly sorry; but it's clearly a case in which I have no right to act. I cannot hear your confession. I have ceased to be a judge of the problems a confession involves. If you will go to a priest, on your return to town . . ."

Olive's broken exclamation interrupted him. Her eyes had dropped to his hands, as he clasped them on the table. Their alteration to what seemed to her heavier and insensitive lines, compared with her recollection of their fineness, expressed for her at the

moment the sterility of his mind. She had a latent sense that some obstacle of experience which was incomprehensible to her interposed between them, and she felt the uselessness of her effort in the face of it.

"So that's what you've done to me—what you're willing to have done to me!" her tone was tremulous. "I say I became a Catholic because of you; of course I did! But I've tried—I've at least been honest. And now I come to you in the greatest moment, and you shirk the responsibility. . . ." His look had turned indeterminately to her, for a second, and she seized on his uncertainty; she dropped to her knees and stretched out her hands. "No, Father, I must speak to you; oh, not as a confessor, as a friend—as anything you please. Don't you see it's common justice for you to hear me out? Here is what my life's come to—this! You know my will, that I'm all will; and yet I'm powerless to save myself from the cheapest and most sordid end. It's a man—of course it was bound to come to that! I've always been searching for something to satisfy me. I've tried to live by my mind, by faith, by anything and everything, and I've perpetually sunk. Now I'm here!"

She waited. Father Ames's eyes had left her, and were set on the open window and the tree tops beyond. Even at the moment, she could feel his wider application of her special case, and that his pity instinctively passed from her problem to such problems as a whole.

"No, you're not so far gone on your road of holiness as that! You will listen to me! You will, if it's the last thing you do in this outer world, help me. . . . Do you want to see me come to this?" She made a wide gesture. "Do you want to see me descend to what

ASCENT

I know is descent—to reducing all my hope and my eagerness to nothing but the coarseness of experience? and with such a man—with Francis Passmore? That's what you've got to save me from; that's what you've got to fight for me. . . .”

Father Ames's face turned slowly, as if the term recalled him from his concentration of a moment before. She watched the process of the readjustment of his attention, and saw that it was followed by his rare frown.

“I don't quite understand you. Are you trying to say to me that——”

She caught his words. “That I'm about to have with Francis Passmore the most brutalised kind of relation? Yes. Ah, Father, you can't yet so have forgotten human sins and human degradations that you don't know they exist! You know him—and you know me! Well, it is brutal, isn't it?—that all my youth and my desire should come to this?” She felt her tears on her cheeks. “I've no illusions; I've all my old clarity; and I know as well as that I'm here, that it's the beginning of the end for me. He's the first step; but what has been my history? Haven't I always gone beyond, always pursued things farther and farther? And if he gives me an illusion of life, of experience, on I'll go. The future . . . oh, I see it as a horrible search, lower, meaner, crueller each time. It's that you must save me from. It's him you must help me to resist.”

She had covered her eyes with her hands, with her head bent against the table. As she paused, something in Father Ames's silence made her raise her face to confront the intensity of the look he bent on her.

It instantly struck her that she had never seen the lines about his mouth so tightly defined or his eyes darker. The effect was so compelling that she heard herself break out, scarcely knowing what words she used. "Oh, Father, I didn't mean . . ."

He arrested her with an imperative gesture. "Get up, Mrs. Devon," he said briefly.

She rose uncertainly, wiping with her bare hands the tears which still stood on her cheeks. "I don't think you understand," she began again; but in an instant he had cut her short.

"Understand . . . if only I didn't!"

"Then you mean——" she was again unable to end her sentence.

"I mean that in your confused wretched existence, I seem to have been the only person who's had the penalty of understanding you."

She returned his look silently, with the traces of her emotion fading from her face.

"It isn't I who've had the power to judge you;" his voice, as he proceeded, was unconsciously touched with his former accent of authority. "It's the laws of which I've been so poor a servant. Measured by any faith or by any honour, you're an outcast, Mrs. Devon. I admit that you were born with heavy penalties of nature, as all misguided force must always be a penalty. But you've had chances which were inimitable; you have had the Church, you have been married to the best of men, and you have had the responsibility of your child; and your mind and your will . . . nothing but chances! Yet what has it come to? I should prefer to see you," the stroke of his words fell deliberately, "debase your life with any man rather than

have you come to me, in this way, to save you from what you haven't the intention to save yourself!"

Olive felt herself on the farthest verge of her control; there seemed to her no defining line between her emotion and her anger, and she searched helplessly for a phrase of reply. She was instinctively trying to chain her attention to the fact that the Ames she had known had disappeared, that his prescience had become bigotry and that she was no longer dealing with a human being but an attitude of mind. "So this is your charity! You and the Church—this is what you do to a creature in such misery as I am!"

Father Ames's hand lifted, and with the gesture he seemed to show her the fruitlessness of any continuance.

"Why did you want to see me?" His accent was shorter with each second. "I've no illusion in this, any more than you. To give you an added sense of adventure—to bring the excitement of transgression into your situation; wasn't it that? I was to struggle, to dissuade you, to implicate myself, to combat," he had the quickest cynicism, "not only your contemplated act, but Passmore, for you. Your errand has had a surprisingly different outcome. You are too intelligent not to see its revelation. It is your contact with spiritual things which has betrayed what you really are."

Olive was conscious that she stretched her hands to where her gloves lay on the table and began to draw them on. She could not trust her voice, in the tumult of her mind; and it was only after a moment, and with the tonic of her rising sense of revulsion, that she tried to speak.

"Your position is admirably clear, and also your

Christian charity. I shall remember them, when you, Father," her tone mounted, "have steeped yourself in a comfortable oblivion. How easy your heaven is to attain! I prefer the human struggles, I admit. I need scarcely say that I'm sorry I disturbed you and the perfection of your obedience. I don't dispute your right to it. It's as egoistic, in its way, as my right to do what I please with Francis Passmore. You and a theory—for your life is a theory—I and he. All such emotions have their resemblances!" Her fingers were struggling, through her dimmed vision, with her gloves, and suddenly she threw back her head, with as sudden a reality in the motion. "Oh, Father, you won't send me away like this! You will pity me and help me!"

Father Ames's immobility held, for the long instant of the look they exchanged. It seemed to her, in their silence, that it was a moment which in itself resumed the flow of years. When he spoke she was as conscious as if he had defined it that its termination was complete.

"You are out of the reach of any man's help, Mrs. Devon; what you need is God's. To Him I can commend you, and I do. That's all I have to say to you. No—!" She had wavered, with the sense of impending departure, and had supported herself for a second against the chair beside her. "I'm sorry for you, indeed, but I cannot allow our talk to end on any note of appeal or of untruth. It is one of the consolations of my renouncement of the world that I need never see such a tortured mind again." He made a quick motion towards the door. "Let us put an end to this, please—and without anything further. There—I believe you

ASCENT

have forgotten your sunshade. It's useless for us to say more. . . . ”

She moved towards the door, with so heavy a feeling of faintness that all she could discern in front of her was the wooden panel and the knob she must turn. With her hand on it, she raised her head and looked once more over her shoulder at the rigidity of his figure from where, beside the table, he faced her. His face was unchanging; and it was dimly present to her that nothing he had said penetrated her like his refusal to accord any existence to the moment of her departure.

XXVII

OLIVE had reached Paris on the Saturday morning, travelling by the night boat.

The journey had remained in her mind as a long series of mechanical incidents. The succession of her thoughts had never seemed to her more rapid, more determined or more completely rootless. Her power of reflection and of derivation was atrophied. She had gone from the train to the boat and from the boat to the French train, with the sense of as relentless a progression in a series of precomposed events as she had, in London, made her preparations and given her instructions to the servants. Her determination to act wholly in accordance with the decision of her will was deeper than a desire. She found herself potentially incapable of anything else, in a moral universe the simplifications of which were complete.

The sense of merely fulfilling her part in the various details of her final choice held when, as she turned away from the bureau at her hotel, she was immediately accosted by an indescribable individual, in the neatest black. His eyes were so schooled that she could not even divine how absolute had been his expectation that she would come; and his tones, those of an attentive secretary with a careful regard for the interests of his employer, perfectly bore out her impression.

"I beg your pardon, Madam, but Mr. Parker will be so pleased and surprised to think you are here. He is expected from Brussels to-night, at 6:40, and he

ASCENT

thought you might possibly be passing through Paris. I was just attending to a little business for him—yes. He mentioned, since I had to call here, that I might enquire if you were expected, and ask if you would dine with him at his flat to-night; and perhaps, he said, if the heat continued, you would care to motor out to the country. . . .”

“Yes. I will go—I will dine with him,” said Olive; the clarity of her voice seemed to her like the clarity of the action of her thoughts.

“Mrs. Parker will probably already have left for the country, but she is hoping to see you there.”

He paused. Her distaste at his adroitness and at the expertness of his evident experience rose for a second to her lips; then she heard that he continued.

“While I was asking, here, at the desk, if you were expected, a lady who was asking for another name heard me mention yours. She enquired whether you were to be in Paris long. I told her I believed not—that I understood you were coming to attend to some business in connection with Mr. Devon’s leaving for America, and to pass the week-end with friends out of town. Her name, I believe, was the Comtesse de Rives.”

Olive’s instinctive distrust of a warning and a frankness which were so much more implicative than evasion, was submerged in an instant, as he pronounced the name. There were echoes in her resentment, she thought, longer than Passmore’s methods could ever stir. She made a decisive gesture.

“I shall be very pleased to see Mr. and Mrs. Parker. Please tell them both so, when you see them.”

“Thank you. And as to dinner, I shall leave a word,

then, for Mr. Parker at the flat; you have the address, I think? He asked me to say that he would dine at half past eight . . .”

Her glance followed his inconspicuous figure through the crowd in the hall. She must of necessity see him so frequently, she supposed, that she would shortly become familiar with the inflexions of his concealments. She could even imagine how perfectly adjusted her own evasions of notice and her own acceptances of insinuation must in time become to his. For this too she would have—she knew her grandfather would have said—her perfect adaptability.

Later in the morning she went out. She had brought very little luggage, and she made her way directly to one or two shops. Here her impression of moving in a totally new existence was no less perfect. As she turned over the linen and the laces spread in front of her and examined the tortoise-shell and gold brushes and boxes and the jewel-like colours in the bottles of scent, she seemed to see some of the avenues by which the concession of her dignity was to be made actual—her sudden extravagances, her complete irresponsibility, the coarsening of her fibre and the failures of her taste. Her imagination was already alive to the ways in which the processes of her debasement would be elaborated. Not the least of her recognitions was the conviction that she would show, in her treatment of Passmore, all of her hard capacity. She could fancy her gradual education, in lines in which he would give her a thorough initiation, and that in the shortest time the action of her mind itself would resemble his, after she had ceded every point of her separate integrity. She turned repeatedly from the obsession of this

impression, and busied herself again with her purchases; but she could not throw off the sensation that the pressure of her humiliation was bending her momentarily lower.

As she started to walk back to her hotel, the familiarity of the streets held her for a moment in front of the steps leading to the Tuileries Gardens. The soft June light, the movement of the motors, the vitality of the French inflexion, laid, whether she permitted it or not, a touch on her indurated consciousness. She saw Rivaudière's smile as she saw the other elements which composed the scene; most of all she was aware of the honest incomprehension of the look which, through the pale afternoon light at Fontainebleau, seemed to her to have resumed his character even more than his charm. Her thought wavered for a second. Then, with the rapidity of reaction, it fastened on a brief word Passmore had said to her, in one of their enigmatic exchanges. "I don't want you to have hopes of me—I don't think I'm capable of feeling," she had broken out, with one of her flashes of frankness; and it seemed to her that, between Rivaudière's sacrifice—she could call it that—of her at Fontainebleau and the amused acceptance with which Passmore had met her exclamation, lay the stages of the collapse of what had made her character.

She was looking across the crowded restaurant, during her lunch, with little consciousness of the figures at the various tables other than as pieces in the puzzle of her impressions, when her eyes idly fell on a woman, alone like herself, seated against the light of one of the large windows. A second later she was stirred to attention. The mention of Madame de Rive's

name, that morning, had brought her vividly into view; but the force her presence carried, as she sat rigidly alert on her reflections, with her hands in her lap, her shoulders inflexible and her look set, was enough to transport Olive back to the hour of their talk. Contrasted with the darkness of her own mind, such perfect compactness had more than ever a directive force. Olive tried for an instant to fancy what such an absorption of thought must deal with and what such indifferent eyes see. Wherever one surprised Madame de Rives, and in whatever circumstances, she could imagine the complete logic of her preoccupation, the steadiness of her criticism and the consistent dispassion of her conclusions.

It was the last personality the impositions of which accorded with Olive's thoughts; yet one of her rarely indeterminate impulses made her pause, as she approached the door to go to her room, at the table in the window.

Madame de Rives's look had at first its former suggestion of being recalled from a distance; but as she met the uncertainty of Olive's face, her own definitely changed.

"I am glad to see you—I have often thought of you," she said unhesitatingly. "Yes! You are pleased to find yourself in Paris again? It is odd, the way you all like to return. . . ."

"I am on my way to spend Sunday with some friends in the country." Olive found herself stating the phrase with a gradually growing apprehension of the importance to her position of open comment; "I chanced, from across the room, to see you. And your brother?"

She had put the question with the same sense of

irresponsibility which had prompted her to stop beside the table. Madame de Rives's glance for a moment seemed to measure this accent in her manner, as if, now that she had traced its relation to Rivaudière and had disposed of its possibilities, she could permit herself an interest in it.

"My brother is in Tunis . . . you did not know, perhaps? Yes, a party of friends, on a yacht. We have had a rather confused spring, owing to the illness of my mother-in-law, here in this hotel. She completely refuses, in Paris, to be with us or with my sister-in-law and keeps always her rooms here; such a place, too, for an illness! But it appears that even the habits of the old are changing. Since to-day I am in attendance on her, I am obliged to lunch here, and I came down from her salon to see this curious scene." Her glance was ceaselessly examining the room, as she spoke, with a frankness of astonishment which betrayed the tone of her own habits. "Extraordinary, is it not?"

Olive's curiosity was still fastened to her. At this near range she could examine the tissue of her expression. Its continuity of attitude completely held; yet Olive found herself suddenly wondering what forms of richness in the field of the human experiences so evidently involved a person had extracted, and whether anyone could be so consistently detached who had not been with equal consistency involved. The suggestion made her feel, in regard to Rivaudière's sister, markedly more intimate and inexorably more distant. For the first time, in the emptiness of Madame de Rives's expression, she felt she could trace what had denuded it. She, it was plain, had given herself to all the possible participations. She had evidently sounded the oppo-

sites between generosity and refusal, between acquirement and sacrifice; and if there had been no alliance between her morality and the hard conditions of her taste, Olive could imagine nothing clearer than the separation between the lapses she had permitted herself and the rigour of her achievements. In contrast to so developed an art of feeling, her own seemed only the more inconsequent and fictitious and more clearly emphasised in its rootlessness; and under the sense of the test, she felt her obstinacy of determination rise, as she made some excuse and continued to the door.

About two o'clock, with her sense of the rapid passage of the hours, she was more and more possessed, as she sat at her window and watched the interweaving of the traffic below, by an irresistible restlessness. Her single requirement was for the last spark of her critical discrimination and her finer apprehension to expire. At the moment even the enjoyment she foretold in front of her,—the luxury of her indifference, the opportunities for commerce with important people, the inevitable growth of her callousness and her carelessness of results,—was held back by this thinning image of her former self. Immeasurably far off, it seemed to her that she still saw her hopes of experience as something high. She was too completely without the enthusiasm of emotion not to know that the least part of her approaching debasement would be her actual relation to Passmore. It would merely be the symbol of her entire concession. Whether it affected her only cursorily, or whether it struck from her a spark of some derivative good, she knew none the less exactly that she could never fool herself as to its soilure.

The resurgence of these thoughts, however she tried to deflect them, became so little tolerable that she decided to go out. It was present to her that she wanted above everything to be where she ran no risk of having her fixity of decision touched by any such accidental encounter as that with Ghislaine de Rives; and she put on a plain dark dress and, once in a motor-cab, she called to the driver to stop at the Pont des Invalides, with the vague intention of taking one of the little Seine boats and of perhaps reaching St. Cloud for an early cup of tea.

Under the brilliant sunshine on the little deck and in the noisy cheerfulness of the crowd of the summer afternoon, so bent on the moment of enjoyment, something assuaged her inner strain. The gaiety of the banks, as the boat glided along, the sudden darkening under the bridges and the blaze of the moving water, in the tremulous light, shut out her reflections. She had indeed, she felt, passed beyond them. Their immediacy had ceased; and all she could trace in her mind were the long reverberations of recollection. For some unfathomable reason, she thought of the village store at Ware, of Norah's irritating habit, before she was old enough to protest, of tying a peculiarly crude shade of pink ribbon at the end of her long braids, and of the quick motion of annoyance with which her grandfather used to raise his head from his Ovid, when he particularly disliked to be interrupted. It crossed the threshold of her mind, for the first time, that she must accustom herself to live on such disassociated images. Her thoughts would shortly pass into facts without reflection. Events were to be merely events to her, quantitative and valuable only for their intrinsic expe-

diciencies. She would cease to have the morality of judgment and of comparison. There would be no relations between her actions; each one of them would minister solely to the necessities of her personal rules, and the only rule left her was that of extortion. . . .

She had raised her eyes, with the feeling that it cost her a definite effort to lift them, as the boat slipped out to the more open reaches of the river, and they lit fugitively on the bench across the deck. A man and a woman were seated opposite her, as isolated as she, since the boat was approaching Sèvres and most of the passengers had disembarked. Olive's empty glance passed over the couple, left them, and abruptly returned. Side by side and turned to face each other, they appeared as absorbed as she in their own preoccupations. They were both dressed with an evidently composed simplicity and their attitude was scrupulously attuned to the inconspicuous. Yet, as her eyes clung to them, Olive felt herself suddenly in the presence of an emblazoned fact. The reserves fell from her face, in the intensity of her curiosity. As she tried to discover what, in their perfect attentuation of aspect, had so sharply impressed her, she tried equally to pierce its meaning. Their motionlessness was as much part of them as the motionlessness of the man's eyes, steadily fixed on the bright water, and of the woman's, as they imitated the direction of his. Her hands lay inertly on her lap and his were on his knee; yet something extraordinarily poignant struck Olive in the fact that, near as they were and with the inexplicable compression of feeling about them, they did not touch each other. The woman's averted face might have had the variations of any past written in it, beneath its con-

ventionality; but what was undeniable was that its past existed. Between them there stretched, to Olive's intensified consciousness, the thousand threads of some dearly purchased exchange, bought at such an evident cost and shaped with such an evident concentration that it seemed to have an immeasurable age. What a record must unite them, she wondered, for this hour of propinquity to touch with such a tranquillity such profundities of experience as kept them motionless and silent. The woman's eyes lifted, every now and then, with a quality deeper than a smile, in their return to his face. Her muteness was evidently determined by recollections and anticipations beyond the necessities of phrasing. The man's very feeling had the practised correctness of an accepted attitude, not of concealment so much as of a sustained repression in the face of the exigencies of experience. When his companion's fur boa slipped down, as she turned her sunshade on her shoulder, he instantly bent forward to replace it. His fingers lingered for the quickest instant on her arm; she turned her head, with the sharpest rapidity of movement, towards him; and it seemed to Olive as if all their history was in the emotion of the brief touch.

She found her hands had dropped to her lap, and that she was gazing before her, oblivious of the disclosures of the humiliation in her face. Opposed to what she saw in front of her, she saw, as vividly as the figures opposite, the rail of the boat and the sunshine, herself with Passmore. The realism of the whole detail flared up in her brain, like a light flung into the darkness of an unsuspected room. The complete vacuity of an alliance with no possible gift of participation, of its debasement and its traffic, came to her, in

the comparison. She had a sudden insupportable sense of the extradition of herself from all which, in the evanescence of each hour, she knew was durable. She somehow understood that it was in her attempt at such an enforcement, with Passmore or with anyone else, that her isolation from any such sentiment would become completely unlivable and that she would most finally lose the possibility of the passion and the repose of such a comprehension.

The bell had sounded, for the withdrawal of the gangplank, when there struck through the mists in her brain the call of St. Cloud. She hurried forward, just before the gates closed. Once she was on the quay her thoughts fell into a complete precision of proportion. She asked a passer-by the way to the nearest telegraph office. Through her walk along the intervening streets, and in front of the little wicket, her determination remained as certain. She drew towards her a telegraph blank and wrote on it Passmore's name and the avenue Montaigne address, and her irony had never seemed to her more expressive than when she added the word "useless."

v

XXVIII

DEVON had received Olive's telegram as he came out of his father's room, on the June morning of his arrival and, with the movement of his hand suddenly attenuated, closed the door behind him.

He passed the slip-shod servant—who, whatever the variegations of her personality, never altered in type—as she thrust the envelope into his hand, and went out with it into the little front garden. A hot early summer wind was blowing over the dusty unweeded walks and the few desolate spring blossoms which survived. The sun beat fully on the shabby house front and on the closed faded yellow blinds. The familiar sounds were everywhere,—the clang of the trolleys at the end of the street, the cry of a vendor, and the nasal voices of the children at play in the yards of the nearby public school. The crudity of ugliness which had surrounded his father had never seemed to him more complete; yet even in face of the finality inscribed on the mute figure over which he had just drawn the sheet, he felt some particular significance in the words on the yellow leaf he held.

His eyes wandered aimlessly beyond the sparse pale tree tops, along the stretch of street, and out to where, as one divined, the edges of the city merged gradually into the open country and the end of the long valley which led to Ware. His uneven youth here, with his sudden arrivals and his embarrassed departures, his

first sense of Olive and the gradual establishment of her permanence in his mind, all fell into the respective proportions which had been established by the fact which had greeted him on his arrival. He felt that his face must look older, as he raised it in the sunlight; he was conscious, for the first time, of an ultimate finality for himself, and that he too would inevitably face this computation, which his father had now made, of the gain and loss of experience. He asked himself what in the world he had done with his life. Even his feeling, the predominant note of his imagination and his fact, must finally be tempered into a connection with the eternal verities. Yet his devotion had never seemed to him to be more of the stuff of reality. He felt it more directly close to him than Olive herself. It was the penalty, he supposed, of having lived so persistently rather with his vision of her than with her as a fact. Whatever his definition, he was suddenly sure, in the moments of his reflection, that it was the last thing, in his relation to living, which he would have been willing to do without; and the thought made his mind revert, with the inexorability of contrast, to the shut dusty library, kept always locked since there were apt to be priceless jades strewn loosely on the table, the chair at the desk, with its ripped covering, the rusty pens and the thick ink, and all the touches which had composed the single scene of his father's life of the emotions.

He had already wondered, during the morning, if it were not the elder Devon's sole fortunate escape from the fantastic misappropriateness which had pursued him that he should have died the evening before, while Devon himself and his mother, just off their steamer,

were already on their way, by the night train, to Wickford. The final caricature of his wife's arrival had, his son felt, been spared him. Devon could see, as his mother stood by the bed, puzzled and incredulous, with the scene she had planned so spoilt and all the possibilities of her gesture finally stripped from her, that she had for the first time asked herself why she had conceivably come. The heat and the annoyance of detail which beset her assumed a sudden element of unfairness. In spite of her experiences, Mrs. Devon still regarded love as symbolised by a wreathed maiden or a lovely child; and a sentiment which could withstand the confusion of the house and the lack of a dressing table, in the room to which the embarrassed maid showed her, was unthinkable to her. Devon saw that sooner or later she would reconstruct the situation on her own terms; his father would have died bequeathing her either the special consecration of his forgiveness or his immortal persecution. But for the moment she was frankly exasperated, and she submitted easily to Devon's suggestion that she go to the hotel and back to New York at the earliest possible moment.

For this too his father would once have had his ready comment; and something poignant struck Devon in the fact that the consolation of all these little acrimonies was now gone, from that consecutive silence. From the artificiality and the affected absurdity, if one put it so, in which he had passed years, he had finally touched a reality. His laborious attempts to create himself a personality had, with a single finger of fate laid on them, exposed their futility. The severance of this odd morose nature and life was not what seemed to Devon difficult of credence or sad; but that severance

ASCENT

without a shadow of foregone happiness, with symbols for beliefs and with irritabilities for feeling, struck him as a loss deeper than the cessation of being. He saw the flow of his own existence as uncharted enough, vague and dissolved, and without that sense of a purpose which had meant, in Ames, a morality and a creed. He knew he had drifted too easily. But at least he had measured himself against the forces of human laws; and the final word, as he thought, to be said about his father was that in the close arid little room, with all his concentration on the stones spread before him he had for most of his life bent over beauty and never seen it.

The moment Olive came down the gangplank, and as he caught sight, under her dark hat, of her increased pallor, the flash of prescience with which he had read the telegram announcing her sudden return had reverted to him.

She had replied to all his questions that the reason she had followed him so quickly was that she felt really ill. A heavy cold had settled on her chest, in London, and she coughed frequently; and when they reached their hastily opened house and she flung herself on a sofa, he could tell at once that she had an unusual lassitude. He had never seen silence so visible as it was in her face, with her eyes set and empty. But as soon as she had rested for an hour she went at once to Mrs. Devon, and he could feel the effort she was making to listen patiently to the already inflated account of his father's last moments and of his perversity in dying while they were on the last stage of their journey to him.

Her reserves were so invariable that, in the hurry of the next days, Devon found himself treating her with an unquestioning acceptance. The burden of his father's estate promised to be a heavy one, complicated as it was by the elder Devon's elaborate precautions that his wife should not interfere with the disposition of his fortune—except for his generous legacy to John—to the Wickford museum. His tartness had penetrated even the legal document, Devon thought; and it was a grim amusement to him to see his mother's wide-eyed astonishment as to how she was going to build an attitude of bereavement on so publicly stated a severance on her husband's part. They had decided to remain in town for the moment, with week ends in the country with his mother where, with Beatrix to help her, she was fast reacting to the position of a person cruelly maligned. Their house had just been vacated by the tenants who had occupied it during their absence abroad; and Olive insisted that she must have time to put things right and to erase the marks of their occupancy, before she could make new plans. When he came home, on the already warm evenings, Devon was apt either to find her busy, with all her concentration fixed on some small details, or in an inert idleness the listlessness of which was more and more remarkable to him. The turn of her head in his direction was without any of the tonic energy she had shown in London, and there was an inexplicable inertia in her interest and a lifeless quality in her quickest motions.

He had delayed very late at his library desk, one evening in early July, with the various papers concerning the intricacies of the division of the jades

heaped about him. Olive had left him about ten o'clock, with her habitual plea that she was tired and wanted the quiet of her room; but just after midnight struck he heard a slight stir at the door, and when he opened it he discovered her standing motionlessly, in the hall, as if she could not determine the direction of her next action.

In her thin evening dress, as she leaned against the dark paneling, and with her loosened hair against the whiteness of her neck, she suddenly struck him as dangerously thin. He rose abruptly, with the softness which his manner assumed with her when it was unguarded.

"My dear child, you're ill! What's wrong? Can I do nothing for you?"

She shook her head. "No—I want to talk to you."

Her reply was as brief as ever, but her tone, he heard, was changed in quality. In response to his murmur that his job was over for the night—that he wished she'd come in and interrupt him—she crossed the threshold. Her step, as she came forward, wavered and paused; and in its uncertainty and its lack of her usual driving quality, it moved him inexplicably.

She rested her hands on his desk and, still standing, she gave him a long look. It was the first, he instantly felt, since her return. He began to speak and then, as her glance deepened, he was abruptly silent. His scale of the measurement of what her face exposed grew with the instants, as if the consecutive stages of the two years since their marriage and of his knowledge of her, back to her childhood, were being displayed before him.

On Olive's side, their confrontation had the effect

of a sudden relaxation, after the steady pressure of control she had maintained. The past weeks had marked her with signs deep enough, she felt, to be beyond any further concealment. She could not say that her inexorability of vision had declined, in any degree, since the moment when her sense of values had had the shock of an acceptance of new proportions. She knew that she had gone back to London and made her plans for departure, with so complete a sense of immunity that she had not feared any accident which, in the chance of the streets or of drawing rooms, might bring her face to face with Passmore. The imputation of the fact that he made no sign to her had struck her forcibly. It was the last penalty of her sacrifice of her self-respect, she had told herself, that he should accept her denial as easily as he had accepted her acquiescence; and she had received the implication of his indifference as steadily as she had received her recognition of its justice.

She had seen very few people, but she had wished to spare herself nothing which could illustrate, in her own view, her independence of what she had done. One afternoon, with a determined disregard of her hesitation, she had called at Brough House, and had found Isabel and the Duchess with people on the terrace. There was too little privacy for her to have any special word with Isabel; but as she lingered in front of her for a moment, by the tea table, and in earshot of everyone else, she had lowered her voice to say: "Has Father Ames gone back, do you think?"

Isabel had instantly lifted to her a look of surprise, across the high tea urns and the crowded cups. "Yes;

I believe he went some days ago. Of course I'm not certain. . . ."

Olive had drawn for an instant a complicated design, with her long gloved finger, on the tea cloth; it had been the sole moment when she felt her self-command in question because of her foregone knowledge of Isabel's next response.

"Shall you ever, do you think, see him?"

"Ah, no! He takes his final vows, you see, next month." Her look hesitated. "But, my dear child, if any message is ever possible . . ."

Olive caught up her uncertainty. "If, in the chances of things, any of you should ever get a word to him—through his brother, or in any way—I should like him to know that I have left England, that I have gone away, that I have left . . ." Her manner had been as authoritative as usual, but her words had confused themselves, helplessly.

Isabel's look had never shown her as definite a liking. "Whether any actual message can reach him or not, don't all one's messages reach him?" She motioned aside a footman, who waited with an empty cup. "It is so impossible for us to talk, here! Can't we see each other again, before you go?"

Olive shook her head. "Thank you—but I cannot manage to be free; and I cannot talk. It's useless." She had held out her hand, without further comment. The failure and fruitlessness of their few words seemed to her symbolic; and the suffering in her mind had been submerged again, with her dominance firmly upon it, to prevent any possibility of a resurgence which, she knew, must incapacitate her. . . .

She seemed to give to Devon, in the uninterrupted

message of her eyes, the history of these fluctuations before she spoke.

"I've been wanting to talk to you, and I've tried, from day to day, to do it; and yet—" her amusement showed dimly—"I have nothing but the old thing to say!"

As her smile lit her face, it seemed to Devon like a rapid incandescence. The frank avowal, in her look, of what she had traversed, was so unlike her that his words halted for a moment, and she pursued: "When you got my telegram, saying I had decided I must rejoin you at once, had you no inkling that I'd been to the end of the world"—her shoulders rose under their thin wrappings—"and back again?"

Some instinct informed Devon that their exchange was too serious for him to sacrifice the crudity of the facts of her case.

"I very distinctly had an inkling. I've not the habit, you know, of having you rejoin me; and I knew my father's condition could have meant very little to you. So my inkling remained unexplained. You're not a person about whom one has much sensitiveness of imagination;" he tried in his turn to smile; "you're all fact."

She was persistently silent for a second, with her eyes set on his desk. The strain in her face, as the moments passed, was so increased that it seemed more and more to trace for him the disintegration which had taken place in her thoughts. She raised her look again, abruptly, to say: "I can't live any more like this. I'm too miserable; and you've got to help me." She made one of her sudden gestures. "I can't feel so condemned, so separate from life, so devoid of feeling. It's

ASCENT

useless—I can't bear it; and only you, John, can teach me. That, in these last weeks, I've understood."

Devon watched her fixedly. "Why? What has made you understand it?"

"Oh, my failures, my bitternesses, my needs. . . ."

He caught her up. "Your needs, but not your feelings."

Olive's head lowered again. "I know; you're right. But who is to teach me to feel, if it isn't you?"

She was motionless for an instant more, and then she sank into the chair beside her, with her arms stretched on the desk and her head on them, in a stream of tears. Devon's arm was instantly around her, and he felt all the force with which her head pressed against his shoulder. She cried for some moments, with the hopelessness of a child; and when he had calmed her, all she would reiterate was that he must help her. It was not until her sobs had subsided that she sat sharply upright, with the tears still on her face and neck and her hands still grasping his.

"I want to tell you—I want you to know," she began, "what happened to me in London. . . ."

His sudden motion had a definitiveness which made hers, by contrast, only a nervous gesture. "As to that, no. You'll tell me nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"That I'll consent to hear nothing, that I want to hear nothing. The details by which you've come to feel as you feel aren't the point. I don't want them. They don't belong to me; and this," he rapidly touched her head, "does."

"But you ought to know . . ." she broke in, persistently.

"Ah, my dear, I won't know! I've believed for years that you'd ultimately need me; and perhaps, now . . ." It was his turn to let his sentence trail off, with his habitually quizzical look.

"But my need—it's as wide as the world!" She pursued with her insistent accent. "I've got to ask of you everything, from the simplest things up. It isn't only that I know nothing; I am nothing. The basis of all my living seems to have been fatally wrong. I've yet to learn every sort of thing most people know innately. I've got to learn a consciousness of life. . . . It's only through human feeling I shall do it. Well, then—" her eyes dropped again to him—"you must help me to that."

He met her gaze without comment. Nothing in what she said seemed to him more touching than the fact that she said it; then his mind gave a sharp turn.

"So that's what all I liked to call my dedication has come to!" He spoke without any trace of acerbity and merely with his habitual brevity. "My quest, my consecration to you—it's finally won from you your permission to help you on the road to your famous curiosity!"

She again pressed her cheek against him. "I believe I have loved you always, and not known it!"

Devon's face showed, for the shortest second, the signs of a quicker emotion than hers. "No, you haven't; and more, my dear, you don't!" He laid his hands once more on her shoulders, with an abrupt energy. "But all you can give me I want—all, all!"

She drew back to look at him. He could see the gathering of an unfamiliar expression in her eyes.

ASCENT

"John, you are an extraordinary person!" she exclaimed.

He shook his head, with his usual dry smile. "It would be easier to let you suppose it, but I'm not! For years, you know, I've refused to accept you on any terms but my own. To the end—and even against you yourself—I'll hold out for them!"

XXIX

THE weeks ran into the summer months and through them; and still it seemed to Devon as if Olive's fingers, when she touched him, held him with an increased force of the appeal she had made to him, on the July evening. The summer was already so far past and her debility, the moment she made any effort, so marked, that they had concluded to let their plans drift and, Beatrix being safely in her grandmother's hands, to save Olive the effort of any decision. Through July Devon frequently motored her to his mother's nearby country house, on a barren stretch of Long Island sand, built in what Mrs. Devon conceived to be a perfect imitation of a Norman *manoir*. There, in the cool breeze, some of Olive's colour wavered at times across her face. But it was apparent that she was less and less well, if only in the intensity of her voice and the sharpness of her eyes; and by September Devon had opened the town house, in spite of the season, and was trying, under the instructions of his doctor, to yield to any of her desires which would give her no effort and arrest her persistent depletion.

One of the ideas to which she most closely clung was that she could not leave him. Even a day or so away made her restless and febrile. Devon was too engaged with his affairs, after his long absence and with the executorship of his father's estate, to consider holidays from his own point of view; but when he offered, with his smile, to toss the jades to the dogs if she would

come with him to the mountains, she had only protested. What she wanted to do, he could see, on the days she felt stronger, was to move ceaselessly about the house, making the most elaborate arrangements for his comfort. So new a consideration struck his grim sense of contrast, and he scarcely knew whether it were pathetic or exasperating to see her bending over his piles of linen and arranging the division of the clothes in his wardrobe.

She was increasingly conscious of a sensation of exhaustion, more than an actual pain, in her back, and more and more he saw her erect shoulders tend to lapse into listlessness. By the early autumn most of her day seemed to him to reduce itself to the hours she spent on her sofa. Devon called in a specialist, and felt a nascent sense of real alarm; but the vague talk of her general fatigue and of her rapid powers of reaction was so born out by his knowledge of her that he put aside the instinct to phrase, even to himself, any definite question.

If the terms of her activity were restricted, he had never seen her mind more positive in its force. For the first weeks after their talk, she was as rapid and as clear as he had ever seen her rapid and clear. Her plasticity of intelligence, even in her ill health, had never seemed to him more responsive or more sure. He never came to her room without finding her deep in a book on architecture; she questioned him perpetually about matters of his knowledge, about his tastes, his theories of design, where he had picked things up and why. She studied even the jades, he saw, with the assertion that she must help him to disentangle the intricacies of the elder Devon's reasons

for the division of his bequests. "I've all the years to make up for, you see," she said to him, when he commented on the fatigue her effort must cost her. "I've all of you to learn."

Devon touched her hands absently for a second before he brought out: "Why don't you just rest, and learn Beatrix?"

"Sooner or later I must learn her, of course. But not because she's herself or even because she's partly me, but because she's you!"

"No—because it's part of your idea!" He separated slowly, one by one, her long fingers, as her hand lay on her coverlet. "You've a terrible realism!"

Her fingers moved spasmodically to catch his. "It is marvellous the way you understand me!"

Devon laughed. "Oh, my dear, I've understood you—yes; even better than poor Ames ever understood you! He judged you, you see, by a code; I've judged you by something larger than a code. Everyone sees you're wonderful, and Ames was wise enough to see you were wonderful without any real wonder in you. It's taken a vague person like me to understand that the wonder was coming to you." His face changed, with one of its rare variations, and his hands returned her grasp. "I really believe it is!"

Her look clung to his, with a sudden uncertainty. "Oh, is it? Is it?" She spoke eagerly, and her voice immediately changed, as if she suppressed her own doubt. "I'm so little accustomed to faith, you know, that you mustn't mind if sometimes I sound ridiculous," she ended.

His first definite association of himself with the

possibilities of happiness had struck Devon, one October afternoon, when the press of his reflections had so absorbed him that he had left his car, on his way up Fifth avenue, and had set out to walk the remaining distance to his house. Olive's steadily increasing dependence on him was more and more persistently in his thoughts. He had been for some reason conscious all day of the suspense which only the special moments of feeling bring. In the past weeks his sensation of safety with her—of the subsidence of her criticism and of the softening of the sharp angles of her personality—had been definite enough to let his vigilance relax and to leave him free with her. For the first time in their relation he had begun to accept her unconditionally and with a sense of security in the quality of her reactions. He knew that his tendency of mind was too largely towards the negative view and towards too close a conservatism of thought; but lately—and particularly during the day—she had seemed to him, as he thought of her, to have softened to the point of a generosity which freed all the constriction of his feeling.

This sense of an assurance of his possession of her response had increased in him unremittingly. He had fancied that he could watch her rapid curiosity discover and trace the ways to his character, with the consistent energy he had always seen it show. His judgment of her was still invariable and separate enough to recognise what, even in her sublimation of him, she would always see; that his tolerance was still, in her view, weakness, and that she had never yet gauged the delicate difference between his constant construction and her own dangerous fluidity. With her inerrant instinct

for acquisition, he had watched her create for him such a personality as her invariable play of restlessness let her create; not with imagination, perhaps, but with the first signs of a sincerity of devotion he had ever seen in her and the existence of which was enough to leave him unquestioning.

He had reached the upper and clearer stretches of Fifth avenue, and he paused for a moment, looking over the wall which edged the park, where he could trace, across the thinning trees, the gathering colour of the last light and the first flash of the evening illumination in the sky. He found his thoughts clinging to the astonishing fact of what made her power with him. He had often tried to solve why it was that whatever she did or failed to do, she had the capacity to give him the stirring sense of upward movement, and to reduce to unimportance any penalties in the importance of a second of her clear feeling. He had more than ever recently asked himself, as he watched her try to temper the intolerance of her judgments and change her conclusions to a different note, whether her poverty had ever been so apparent as now when, in this revulsion of her experience, she tried to learn the meaning of contribution. The falsity of all her processes of manufacture had never seemed to him so absolute as since he had seen them displayed with himself as their goal. Her rapidity of assimilation was as innate, in regard to the terms of sentiment, as it had been in all her experiments. It had been when she assured him, with all the elaboration her capacity could put into the assertion, that here, finally, was her greatest adventure, that he had been most fully sure of the inescapable condemnation of her temperament—that she must

seize, and could never learn. Yet there, he told himself, with his habitually caustic conclusion, was where he came in. It had needed, at times, all his self-command to withstand the force of her very generosity. But no certainty had ever seemed to him as immutable as the fact that it had been worth it, and that to see her try to dedicate herself and to respond had quickened the pulse of his existence so that everything else below this point had lost its savour.

He opened her sitting room door, half an hour later, to find the room dark. By the light of the wood fire, as it flared up, he made out that the lace covering on her sofa was tossed to one side and the sofa empty; and after the second which it took his eyes to suit themselves to the obscurity, he saw that she was standing, drawn to a rigid fixity, against one of the dark velvet curtains.

Devon was in an instant conscious of a change in the atmosphere; and a shock of incertitude touched his mind. It suddenly occurred to him that both of them had insensibly come, in their absorption—she in her own processes and he in watching her—to measure less steadily the progressive signs of her weakness; and he remembered that the specialist he had last consulted might again have come to see her.

"I thought you weren't to leave your sofa just yet! I thought you weren't to stand!" he protested.

"I know; that's it . . . I am to lie flat;" her words might have made any meaning conceivable, without reaching his brain. All he could find the force to comprehend was the quality of a stroke in her tone.

"Owen has been here?" he tried to speak naturally.

"Yes."

Devon stepped towards her, with a deeper sense of vagueness. "And he's told you——?"

"It's I," she had all her precision, "who have told him. Oh, they both came, he and Dr. Freeborn. They nodded their heads a great deal—they said they'd at last got results from the cultures they've been taking. Owen is coming back, at seven, to see you; he tried to telephone you, just before they left, but you'd gone from your office."

She was still motionlessly white against the curtain, with her attenuated strength stretched, as he saw, to its furthest verge.

"What they weren't prepared for was what I told them. It came across my mind . . . one of those things to which I've been so accustomed that I'd long since forgotten it . . . that my mother, when she died, was found to have tuberculosis of the spine."

The dusk of the room seemed to Devon, for an instant, to blaze into clarity; he kept an instinctive hold on his control, but words were past his capacity.

"Uncle Joseph Trail died of it," her phrases fell without hesitation; "and his mother—my grandmother—before him. There was another sister, too, who showed symptoms; and Abby, I seem to remember, had a little brother who. . . ." She lifted her hand helplessly to her forehead. "I can't think it out. They've all always seemed to me so foolish and so contemptible. . . ."

She waited for another moment. "My heritage from the Trails—the one thing they've ever given me . . ." and Devon heard her murmur, as she swayed and sank to the ground, "how grandfather would have laughed!"

XXX

PHILIP was rocking cautiously, in his low chair beside the grate, with Beatrix curled closely on his knees. Beneath his breath he murmured, in a tone carefully muffled, the scraps of nursery rhymes which came vagrantly into his mind. He had forgotten so many of the words that every now and then his near-sighted eyes peered down uncertainly at her head, bent in the curve of his arm, to see how many of his lapses reached her. His strangest surprise, in the serried rank of surprises of the last twenty-four hours, was Beatrix. His knowledge of her, until now, had been limited to occasional moments with her, when she was dressed in her embroidered frocks and held by her nurse's hand. The miracle of it seemed to him that she came to him naturally and without criticism. It struck him as so astonishing that it was disquieting; and again and again, during their long day together, with the house hushed and the sense that there were gathered, outside the closed pine door, so many forces and facts which he could not comprehend, he had glanced furtively at her unconscious face, to see what sudden relegation of him might as suddenly flare out of her eyes.

Into the even security of his days—his stroll to the village law office where he maintained a fictional activity, his long gossips over the soiled table-cloth in the fly-blown dining room of the Ware hotel, heated by its iron stove to the temperature of July, his call at

the post office for the evening paper, on his way home, and his supper, with Norah to gossip over his shoulder, under the students' lamp—Devon's telephone message, a few days before, had come with the effect of an overturning of all his confidence. That Olive was ill—gravely ill, Devon had briefly said—seemed somehow less perturbing than the fact that they were to arrive, with a trained nurse and maids and heaven knew how many trunks. In his mind their luggage multiplied itself endlessly, until the station master at Ware was crushed under its bulk and his friendship for Philip alienated in perpetuity. The details were all incomprehensible enough to him; but there hovered at the edges of his vague thought the fact that it was most incomprehensible of all that Olive had wished to come. He had tried to express his uncertainties to his son-in-law, that morning; but Devon had asked him, with a directness which always disconcerted his flurried consciousness, to wait. Olive had stood the journey badly; that was the one fact paramount in Devon's mind, and he was off to Wickford for the day, he said, to meet and bring back an excellent man from Paris, who happened to be at the hospital there for a series of lectures, and another nurse.

"Olive will talk to you when she's rested enough—later in the day," he had ended, as he drew on his gloves, and the lines thickly drawn under his eyes had relaxed for an instant in their look at Philip. "Don't worry too much, Mr. Lacy. Let's wait until we see this new man. . . . And I've the specialist who has been looking after her in New York,—the best in the world, they say,—coming up next week and whenever we want him."

The questions seething in Philip's brain—where was the trained nurse to have her meals, did Beatrix's milk need to be boiled, and what in the world could be done about the broken places in the back stairs, since he hadn't had time to have them mended?—had had to be content with this. Throughout the day, which he and Beatrix had spent in the sitting room, he had heard no sound except every now and then the nurse's quick footfall on the stairs. At five o'clock she had opened the sitting room door, with a request which had added perceptibly to his nervous apprehension. Olive sent him word that—of all things—she wanted to see Abby Trail. He was to have Norah run over and ask Abby to come to her at six; she was generally at her best about then; and he himself was to go up to her with Abby. He had repeated the facts endlessly to himself, as if repetition could denude them of some of their strangeness, between the verses he was declaiming with a ritual regularity.

A step sounded on the porch outside, followed by the sharp tinkle of the electric bell at the front door, and Philip's face smoothed with relief. He rose eagerly, to find Miss Trail's square figure already in the passage way. Her open face acted upon him with an unconscious reassurance, and he drew her into the sitting room.

"Oh, Abby, I thought you'd never come; and Norah says the cold's awful. Olive's here—you know, of course! They took the day train and arrived last night. She's been ill, you know, and they're so anxious—and she wants to see you; it's something particular,—of course it must be. You can imagine how surprised I was—why, it was the very last thing

I ever expected! And she's ill—really ill. No, it does seem as if all the trouble in the world had to come to me——!”

Miss Trail, with a pat on his arm, had motioned him to silence. The nurse was standing at the door again, and she went forward and exchanged a rapid word or two with her. Philip set down Beatrix on the hearth rug, with her bricks in front of her, and gave a cautious eye to the coals; then, with his deepening expression of pained incomprehension, he followed Abby up the stairs.

Olive had been taken, the night before, to her grandfather's room; and its small confines, in the gathering dusk, threw into sharp relief the narrow bed and the blackness of her hair on the pillow. She lay with the same immobility—the thought had circled in her mind, throughout the day—with which Mr. Lacy, in his last hours, had lain. The years between them, as well as the years since his death, had been cancelled with the idea, and she had caught herself wondering if he had been as annoyed as she at the constant sounds from the kitchen and the pattern of the ornate wall paper, as one's glance followed it; and if from the same pillow he had looked at his approaching exploration of an infinitude with anything like her eyes. Her look, as Philip and Abby stood in the doorway, was as full as ever of its reticences. It had attached itself, with a fixity of absorption, to her bare arm, lying across the sheet, with her rope of pearls twisted two or three times about it and slipping between her wrist and her sharpened elbow.

She turned her head, at a word from the nurse, and as she greeted them her voice had its definite quality.

"Well, Abby—" she made a motion with her hand—"it was nice of you to come in. Times change, don't they? It must be quite a journey for you from the idea you've had of me all these years—to see me prostrate! Yes, and asking a charity of you—I!"

"Of course, Olive, I'm glad to see you," Miss Trail had touched the coverlet, as she stood by the bed, with a hand accustomed to sickness. Her reddened face was deep in its gravity. "And I'm glad you're here—since we heard you wanted to be here! The trip wasn't so easy for you, I guess, and it's a good thing it's over with. I've been so sorry to hear it—all you've had to go through. And as for favours,—well, anything I can ever do for you is done; I'm sure you know that!"

Olive again shifted her head, with an added restlessness in the motion. A bright blaze of colour in her cheeks seemed to rise and fall with her breathing.

"I told the nurse I wanted father here when you came; I'm going to shake all your preconceived notions of me, and it's so much shorter work to shake you together. What's become of that house of your father's, Abby, on Long Hill? The Long Hill farm, they called it, I think."

"Long Hill—!" Miss Trail hesitated. "Why, of course . . . ! I'm surprised you remember it. The house has been empty now, for nearly a year; it's a dreary kind of place, way off on that hill-top, and poor soil. But in the spring we were thinking we'd try to fix it up a little, so as to get a good tenant . . ."

"Well, here's your tenant." Olive spoke with all her succinctness. "I want the house."

"You!" Abby had broken out before Philip could murmur. "Why, Olive. . . ."

"Yes, I want it. John understands, and he's willing. He'll manage everything. He's used, you know, to my impossible ways. Beatrix, father, can stay down here with you and with her nurse; and the doctors can come to me. John wants to see you at once, Abby, about getting it a little tidy for us. I don't suppose it's luxurious! But as soon as it's ready—and when I can stand it—they'll move me up. They'll have to hurry," her ironic gaze swept the figures beside her bed; "I'll have to get through the roads before the snow comes, won't I?"

Abby's pale puzzled eyes fixed her. "Of course you can have the house, and welcome. But it's in no kind of order; and way off there . . . I really do think you'd best think about staying here, if it's the high air you want, and letting us all fix you up comfortably. . . ."

"But there's no plumbing!" Philip broke in; his final mystification was reached.

"And really, Olive, it's the wildest sort of place . . ."

Olive's attention seemed to cling suddenly to the words.

"That's just what I want. I don't care about the paint or the plumbing, father—or anything else." She made her impatient gesture. "I've done with all the rest of it! What I want is the bareness." Her eyes closed for a moment. "I know you think I'm mad enough. I think I'm rather mad myself. It's only John who doesn't; and when I said to him that I had to come back to Ware, away from the ease and the care and the doctors, and everything most people want, and had to come because I'd so hated it, he understood—oh, better than I did. And now, when I want to go

to the loneliest place possible, what I'd hate even more than Ware itself, he understands that too. I daresay it's not orthodoxy, father; but it's easier to die in ugliness—to let life go when it's stripped. . . . So now you know why I've come. I'm trying," her smile lit her eyes for a second, "to get used to eternity . . ."

Her voice trailed off. "Do you remember, Abby, that John and I met you there, one evening when you were coming out of the farm, and we passed you on the road—such a road!"

"Yes; I remember just as if it was yesterday;" Abby's voice was grave.

"And Lizzie—what was her name, who lived at Long Hill? Lizzie with the history, you know; what's become of her?"

"She got in bad ways again," Miss Trail's tone was reluctant. "I couldn't do anything with her, and she slipped off, one night—no one ever knew how. But, my dear—" she hesitated.

"How far more consistent than I!" Olive's look had drawn Miss Trail again to the bedside, and her eyes met her fully. "She at least had the courage to get what she wanted, while I . . . No, Abby, you wouldn't call my irreligious state of mind pretty, I see!"

Abby bent over her. "It's such a wonderful climate, you know, and things do happen that are so extraordinary . . . !"

Olive's hand touched hers. "That's nice of you! But really I don't need it; or perhaps I ought to say, it's no good. Then it's all right about the house? And now do, if you don't mind, let me rest. . . ."

As he watched her gradual depletion, Devon thought

chiefly of two things. What was most ceaselessly in his mind was the progressive loss he had for so long traced of her first integrity, that youthful wholeness which had given her, even in her egoism, more than anyone he had ever seen, an eagerness as high and pure as the most bodiless illusion; and of the concessions and soilures in her sacrifice of herself. No chance of accident could so have hurt her—not, he felt, the coarsest and the most promiscuous experience—as her consuming individualism and her ignorance of any values but her own. The others would have been errors and faults of standard; but her preserved incapacity to feel and be and her perpetual imposition of herself, had frayed and destroyed her personality, until that fact in itself seemed intolerable to him.

The second thought so constantly present to him was the persistent impression, which he had always felt, of her identification with larger issues than her own. Her lack of any visible tradition or standard, except of the miniature personal ones, her failure in her faith, her complete negation of any obligations to individuals or to a society, had made her extraordinarily suggestive of processes and penalties of which she was only an exemplification. She loosed her hold on the conditions of her life with this same suggestion of dealing in wider spaces than the miseries of even her suffering. At times, when he sat beside her bed, in the immeasurable desolation of the farmhouse kitchen, which, at this temperature, was the only habitable room, Devon felt himself caught up by the high hand with which she carried her surrender. Her confidence in the validity of her idea never quivered at the thought of their removal. She had had a profound revolt, but

saying, ceaselessly, how kind Abby is . . . ! And I used to say, when I was tiny, that I wouldn't die; yes, and believed it, too! Well, perhaps it's better; perhaps I should only have made you unhappy again . . ." Her voice stopped and changed. "If I hadn't been frightened into it, I should never have admitted that!" she ended, with a flare of old Lacy's sagacity.

He raised his head to look at her. "But of course you'd have made me unhappy; you'd have gone against—oh, not so much me, but the laws of feeling. You're a rebel, Olive;" his grasp tightened. "As if I minded! My relation with you has been in spite of yourself; but what does that count? My devotion to you has been, you know, in some ways, your only approach to a soul!"

Her rare smile showed. "I don't understand you; but since you say it. . . ."

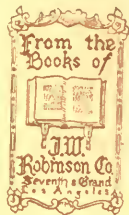
Her eyes closed, and as he leaned close to her he could see, with the fading of her strength, that the thought faded from her face.

Devon rose and, moving silently across the room, he opened the door and stepped out into the profundity of the night. A snow was falling through the darkness. The mystery of its sound, in the still air, laid on him the touch of ultimacy. He stood and listened to it, tracing, as it seemed to him, with his vitality itself, the long stages which had led to her final arrival. The mysterious alchemy of a fate, working against her personal volition and concessions, had never appeared to him larger. While this sense of extension so possessed him he could see that, even in her dependence and in her attempt at response, she had given him something the inevitability of which was almost as rich

as the emotion of which she was incapable. With the passage of his thoughts and his beliefs, out through the obscurity which was to be the next stage of her journey, he felt his own personality pass. It was this same conviction of the identity of himself with her, with which, one spring morning a few weeks later, he saw her carried out to the hill-top and laid in her grave.

Finis.

W.P.



UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 110 635 0

E1122030

\$2.00

